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THE GIRL FROM U.N.C.L.E.

The Birds of a Feather Affair

A novel based on the NEW NBC TELEVISION network series starring Stephanie Powers and Noel Harrison

THE MAKING OF AN U.N.C.L.E. GIRL

"If you're going to kill a man with your bare hands, Miss Dancer, make certain you know where the beggar's feet are. It's a mistake you won't be able to make twice."

—Mr Waverly, Headquarters, N. Y.

"*Mais non,* my dear April! Once you have made your thrust, recover *immédiatement.* You will not want to be covered with the blood of your victim, *n'est-ce pas?*"

—Rene de Fresnay, Master Of The Sword, U.N.C.L.E. Academy

"It's in the form of a harmless jelly compound, April. Light it and it just flares harmlessly. But if you contain it in some tube or cylinder, it would destroy this whole building."

—Mark Slate, Laboratory, U.N.C.L.E.

"Nitrogen narcosis, Dancer. If you stay down too long or too deep, you'll get silly in the head. Maybe hand your oxygen filter to a shark or go dancing with an octopus. So make certain you never go down to great depths without another experienced diver. Got me?"

—Sam Wales, Scuba Expert, Tampa, Fla.

"No, you won't fall in love, my girl. You're in love already—with U.N.C.L.E."

—April Dancer, standing before a mirror

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the girl from U.N.C.L.E.
The Birds-of-a-Feather Affair

by Michael Avallone

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This one is for my sister Grace, who taught me my first steps

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For The Uninitiated

The letters U.N.C.L.E. stand for *United Network Command of Law Enforcement.* This is an organization of unusual quality and outstanding ability; its main function is to defeat the forces of global operations that seek to subjugate civilization as we know it beneath the hell and totalitarianism of tyranny.

To combat all the deadly *isms,* there is U.N.C.L.E. No other arm of counter-intelligence and espionage exists in which the range of counter—*ism* endeavor is so nonparochial and far-flung. The personnel of U.N.C.L.E. is intentionally multinational and multilingual. All races, colors and creeds combine their efforts to block any world power or underground organization that attempts to unbalance the scheme of things by force.

U.N.C.L.E. is subdivided into six sections:

SECTION I: Policy and Operations
SECTION II: Operations and Enforcement
SECTION III: Enforcement and Intelligence
SECTION IV: Intelligence and Communications
SECTION V: Communications and Security
SECTION VI: Security and Personnel

There is a profitable overlap of one Section into another. Section II is perhaps the most vital of all the departments in that it is there that the all-important job of *execution* of the work of the other five sections truly solidifies into reality.

For there is one country, one force, one power, whose entire *raison d'être* is world domination. Out of this country has come an organization of supra-people who seek to rule the universe and are known by the code name of THRUSH.

U.N.C.L.E. is the only answer for THRUSH.

No one has ever learned what the lettered name of a bird symbolizes.

But it is not the dove of peace. It is the bird of war. All-out, deadly, no-holds-barred war.

U.N.C.L.E. has the men to stop them.

And the women.

What the Girl Is

She pinned herself against the stone wall of the building, her spiked heels anchored to the thin strip of ledge which ran like an ornamental belt about the nineteenth floor of the Hotel Taft. She waited for her reflexes to return, for the dull fear to leave the pit of her stomach. A swarm of monumental doubts, concerning the wisdom of fleeing out here to the ledge to run away from death, tormented her. But soon, all the bees died. Her rigid training took command.

Briefly, keeping her mind clear, she surveyed her position. It was acutely disagreeable.

Far below the tips of her I. Miller pumps, like harbor lights in the night, Manhattan traffic moved quickly, smoothly. The circus lighting of Times Square became a blinding glare of nudity against the massed blackness of the buildings—canyon walls rising starkly high. A star-bright night shone overhead.

Enough light to die by.

She was nineteen floors above the street, her lithe figure straining against the dizzy environs of space. The silver lamé of her gown, clinging to every feminine line of her body, was now a laughable luxury. She was like some displaced Cinderella lost in transit. The danger was all too apparent. The next window was a good twenty feet away.

The black attaché briefcase, which she could afford to lose as little as life, totally hampered her slow and torturously hazardous progress. The spiked heels didn't help at all. She might have been walking on stilts.

She held the briefcase behind her curved back, one slender arm extended for balance, flattening herself against the cold stone sides of the building. Her ivory cheek was pressed to the facade.

She took a deep breath. Her body trembled.

At least, she was away from the killing ground. They had sought to bottle her up in the corridor. Now, there was only the proposition of getting off the ledge without breaking her neck—and getting the briefcase and its valuable contents back to Headquarters. The odds weren't too good.

Slowly, she edged along the narrow concrete strip, inch by inch, supremely conscious of the shaky purchase of the spiked heels. There had been no time to remove her shoes and now it was too late. Life was sweet but she would not endanger the casual passersby below with the outlandish hazard of falling spiked pumps. That too was laughable, somehow.

The night wind built up a soft yet disturbing breeze. The billowing

of her dark hair, worn long for this assignment, unsettled her. She pushed it out of her mind and concentrated on her feathery ballet across eternity.

The assignment was ending badly; she had had success in her hand, the briefcase, and now, it might cost her her neck. They had got on to her somehow.

Ten feet of the tricky passage lay behind her, now. The safety of the next window drew comfortably nearer. She had to fight against a tendency to speed her steps. She kept her eyes glued on her goal. The briefcase snagged once on a jagged scale of stone and she paused, heart beating. She teetered precariously for an instant. Then she righted herself and moved on.

The briefcase seemed to weigh a ton though it contained only thirty five pages of highly specific top secret data. And clothes.

Nine feet, eight feet, seven, six, five, four, three——

She heard the window ride upward before she saw the man. A fast, rising, grating sound of doom.

She froze on the ledge, trapped like a bug on a specimen board.

Just before her, a gargoyle face, jutted into view, poised against the glare of neon from below. The head was fixed on awesome shoulders. Now giant hands reached for her. The face was a grinning mask of intermingled rage and amusement.

"So!" The man snarled in the same thickly accented voice she had heard in the cocktail lounge (he had sought then to make a continental pickup). "You will not escape, as you think. My friends are down below to claim the briefcase from your corpse if—"

The hands shot toward her. To push, to jar, to kill. To seize the briefcase.

She bent backwards, hugging the wall. Her right hand moved with the blur of a comet, unhooking a cameo brooch fastened to the throat of her gown. An oblong of brilliant onyx and jade twinkled. She flung her hand toward the man. With the gesture, a thick spray of inky fluid, released with the pressure of a forefinger on a concealed lever, saturated the assassin's eyes. His face darkened rapidly.

He roared in surprise and pain. The viscous, irritating concoction, product of the highly advanced Headquarters Research Laboratory, had never worked more devastatingly.

The man forgot where he was, nineteen floors above the sidewalk. He threshed forward in dark agony, clawing vigorously at his eyes. He lowered his bull's head, moaning, as he doubled over the sill. The back of his neck lay exposed. She helped him the rest of the way.

She chopped down savagely with her right hand, clubbing the man over the parapet of the window. The stiffened palm of a Karate blow fell like the stroke of an axe. The assassin's weight, coupled with his

own sudden unconsciousness, sagged over the sill. His body, top heavy with torso, sprawled outward. Gravity did the rest.

She did not watch.

Mercifully, the senseless carcass plummeted into the lights below. It was as if some some dark mass of masonry had broken loose from the hotel itself. The hollow, breaking sound came up from the ground below as faintly as the distant thump of a toppled garbage can. The noise was lost in the tootling of traffic sounds, the clamor of New York after dark.

And then a woman screamed. A thin, piercing wail of terror and disbelief. Talk about flying spiked pumps.

She stepped quickly into the black refuge of the hotel room. She was too grateful to pause for investigation. Her left hand was sticky with the pressure of her palm on the laminated handle of the attaché case. A fine sheen of moisture dampened her body. The silver lamé dress clung to her like a shroud.

The room was empty.

With nothing else to deter her, she found the back stairway of the hotel. As she walked slowly down the dimly lit staircase, she swiftly and smoothly divested herself of the lamé gown. Before she had descended five flights, her appearance had changed radically. The briefcase, apart from its valuable papers, had yielded a tweed, two-piece outfit, sensible flats and a pair of rimless glasses. Her long dark hair had disappeared beneath the cramped brim of a soft, velour man's fedora.

It was midnight, and Cinderella was leaving the ball, after all. No fairy godmother had arranged the miracle.

She managed to leave the hotel, skirting the official uproar of the strange accident in front of the Hotel Taft. Wherever the assassin's friends were, they did not spot her. She walked quickly toward Fifth Avenue, ignoring all cabs and passersby. A friendly drunk giggled at her wolfishly as she came by, but she dodged him nimbly. Within minutes, she had found the subway she wanted. She took a ride of three stops to her East Side hotel.

Once she was safely esconced in her third-floor room, she opened the briefcase, removing a small, square metal case that for all the world resembled a cigarette case. She thumbed it and a low, beeping sound was audible. She held the square case several inches from her mouth. She had a lovely mouth. One would have been hard put to believe she had just killed a man.

An electronically relayed voice bridged the tiny space between her lips and the case.

"*Yes, Miss Dancer?*"

"Mission completed," she replied, in a voice that might have sent

thrills of anticipation down the spine of the most jaded male. "The briefcase will be turned over to the UN in the morning."

"*Good.*" The voice was dry, patient and eminently English. "*Any complications?*"

"Yes."

"*Go on.*"

"I had to scratch one Comrade X. Just as well. He was the only one who could have identified me, Mr Waverly."

"*Then you had no other alternative. Anything else?*"

"Yes. Please tell the Lab to work on something for high heels. They should be made detachable so they can be jettisoned easily. They could trip a girl up sometimes."

"*I see. Yes, you have a point. Not very desirable for walking along ledges, are they?*"

She restrained a smile. She might have known. The Taft business was old news already at Headquarters. It figured that Mr Waverly, head of Section II, Operations And Enforcements, would have had her covered somehow.

"*Report here tomorrow at ten o'clock,*" Mr Waverly said. "*A good night's work, Miss Dancer. Get some sleep.*"

"Yes, sir."

The beeping sound vanished. She closed her eyes for a long, delicious moment of relaxation. So the UN would get their precious papers back—all the notes and recorded data on the Space Program which the enemy had wanted so badly. But it would all have come to nothing if Comrade X had shoved her into eternity.

She thought of the cold and hard concrete sidewalk in front of the Taft and shivered.

Nerves were an occupational hazard. Though it was best to have them when all the shooting and the tumult was over. But, after all, she was a woman.

In the morning, she'd check out of the hotel, having no further need of her cover as Agnes Malloy, dress buyer from Chicago, Illinois, in town for the Annual Dressmaker's Convention which had gathered at the Hotel Taft. By morning, she could return to her own little apartment downtown and resume her identity as Miss April Dancer. The UN Papers Affair was over.

April Dancer.

The girl from U.N.C.L.E.

The United Network Command of Law and Enforcement needed women agents, too. After all, for all of the superb abilities of agents like Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin, there was one specialty of April Dancer's that they didn't and couldn't perform.

If a female enemy agent walked into the powder room, April

Dancer could follow her.

Not even her working partner Mark Slate could do that.

Sister Agent

Mr. Alexander Waverly was worried.

As executive head of all the sections that comprised the unique organization known as U.N.C.L.E., one through six inclusive, he was not a scared white rabbit. In the extraordinary complex of steel walls, corridors, elevators and offices, there were thousands of buttons at his disposal. Any one of them could institute all sorts of activity, research, security measures—and attacks. Including panic.

An orderly row of ten enamel buzzers were immediately available in Waverly's private office. Every color of the spectrum, every purpose in the universe. At his very fingertips lay the power to send an agent winging to far-off Ghana, or to order a cup of iced tea from the commissary. Only Waverly himself could tell which color button could perform which magic.

Mr Waverly felt like pushing a button now. He clucked aloud to himself, as though chiding his judgment. When he was alone in his Headquarters office, he often did. Now, behind his contour chair, Manhattan, sunlit and golden on this Fall day, glistened, together with the Queens shoreline. In the foreground, the tall monolithic glass structure of the United Nations Building towered above the East River.

With sudden impatience, Waverly revolved forward in his leather swivel chair and thumbed one of the ten buttons on his desk. The blue one.

A smooth, unhurried female voice sounded from no apparent position in the vicinity of his desk.

"Section Two. Yes, Mr Waverly?"

"Has Miss Dancer reported in yet?"

"No, Mr Waverly. She is expected here at ten o'clock. Word has come from the UN, however, that she has completed her drop."

"Hmm." Waverly pyramided his fingers thoughtfully. "I take it we have had no further word of Mr Slate."

"No, sir. He is now an hour and a half overdue."

Waverly's frown deepened. "Can you contact Miss Dancer?"

"Yes. She is equipped with homing range finder and we have her triangulated."

"Good. Instruct her to stop by Mr Slate's flat to pick him up. Our flamboyant colleague was to be here for his briefing session on the Zorki Affair. All attempts to reach him have failed. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mr Waverly. That all?"

"Yes, thank you."

Waverly thumbed the blue button again and relaxed. His lined face

lost some of its concern. He had released himself from the one anxiety of his profession. He could never eradicate a certain sense of guilt if ever he failed to deliver the maximum security of his high office to any agent or officer of U.N.C.L.E. Plus which, he had an inescapable father hen (or bear) emotion for his agents. Napoleon Solo was off in Rangoon seeing to that rumor of some devilish ray weapon that had drawn the interest of THRUSH. Mr. Kuryakin was with him, since they teamed so well on these endeavors. And now, Mark Slate and April Dancer were a bit closer to home.

The fact that Mr Slate had not put in his scheduled appearance at Headquarters was disturbing. He had proven his worth many times in the past, and though he was not the predictable sort of operative one might hope for, he had never been tardy for his assignments. It was most disturbing.

Waverly was a lean, weather-beaten apparition who constantly wore baggy tweeds, his color preferences definitely leaning to brown and amber hues. He handled pipes incessantly, working his spatulate fingers over their varied bowls, but never smoking them. He seemed, for all the world, like a man from a past age—a gentle yet reproving headmaster of ancient history who tended toward absent-mindedness. Yet the cragged, leathery face was the facade for one of the finest minds in U.N.C.L.E. Five titled men, of varying nationalities, guided the organizational operations of U.N.C.L.E. And Mr Waverly was one of the very select five.

Now, he chose a chestnut brown briar from the center drawer of his desk and sucked on the stem experimentally. His brows were knit in a scowl. It wasn't like Mr Slate to be late for any Headquarters matter.

Not like him at all.

Mark Slate's apartment was in a brownstone tenement on the East Side below Fourteenth Street. April Dancer had never exactly liked the neighborhood, even allowing for Mark Slate's individual brand of rugged personality. Like Garbo, he always wanted to be alone.

But there was more cause for unhappiness than Slate's casual environs. April had piled out of her cab, paying the dissatisfied driver a small tip that netted her a snarl and entered the shabby old brownstone, and climbed to the second floor, where she found the door to his apartment unlocked. She knocked softly in the shave-and-haircut rhythm followed by Churchill's Beethoven V For Victory code —*da da dahhhh dahhhhhhh*—which Slate would recognize. But there was no response from within.

Ringing the black porcelain buzzer to the left of the door, which chimed like a Bach fugue, only elicited more silence.

April's face became a blank mask.

For her UN drop of the briefcase, she had attired herself in a sensible dark skirt and jacket, brightened with a red roll-necked sweater. On her head she wore a tam curved to the tilt of her head. Her patent leather handbag was small and functional. She wore simple yet fashionable flats today. Any observer would have envied the man she was calling on.

She toed the door inward gently, body to one side of the barrier. Light spilled out from the flat but there was no burst of gunfire or welcome of any kind. She eased herself inside, with a deft plunge to the floor, her hand leveling the black patent leather bag. A pressure on the metal clasp and the bag could fire a .32 caliber bullet.

Rising, she felt a trifle foolish.

Slate's modest little flat was as familiar as ever. The same old green butterfly chairs, the 1919 secretary by the window that faced the street and the convertible couch. There was nothing else to the apartment except for a lean-to kitchen—and numerous closets. Slate had an enormous appetite for everything but food. The confirmed bachelor bought all his clothes on Carnaby Street and one of the closets was a veritable warehouse of tweeds and loud weskits. Another contained a guitar, and stacks of rock-and-roll records. In line with an inverse snobbery, belied by his indolent manner of speech and languorous movement, a third closet secreted almost everything that an RAF veteran might find worth keeping. Ever since Slate had transferred from London Headquarters to New York, he had tried to keep England with him wherever he went. But his love of women, his passion for sports cars, his Cambridge attainments and his Olympic ski skills, marked him for the international man of the world that he was. April had always been fond of him.

The bed had not been made.

Mark Slate was nowhere to be seen.

But there was a woman sitting in the green butterfly chair facing the front door from the far side of the room. A woman staring at the floor as if her life depended on the fixity of her gaze.

April froze where she was, the handbag still pointed like a gun.

There was no time to wonder about the woman. About her flaming red hair, her wide shelf of breasts or her long white legs thrusting from a beige sheath skirt. The rising and falling of that bosom, straining against a cashmere sweater, said it all.

The striking redhead was a complete stranger, whom April had never seen before. She did not stir, but her eyes were popping with fright, her complexion was paler than a sheet and she was strained back in the chair, unable to take her eyes off the floor. Rigid in the grip of some all-enveloping terror, April thought, for she had seen that

look before. Her eyes followed the line of the redhead's vision until it reached the point where there was no need for questions. She now knew why the woman was incapable of uttering a sound. Or a whisper.

The worn crimson carpet of Mark Slate's floor had taken on a new design. Coiled like a length of artistic rope, blending with the pattern of the linoleum, lay a *reptile.* It had such magical contour and color that one might have paused to admire rather than fear.

Somehow, inexplicably, impossibly, a *fer de lance* was snaking along the floor toward the redhead's exposed legs. There was barely another yard and a half to cover. The triangular head was poised, the forked tongue flicking. The ropelike body danced and weaved. The woman's eyes bulged. Corded muscles stood out in her slim throat.

April raised the handbag and sighted carefully.

The target was small, no larger than an egg, and more than ten feet away, but there was no time left. The girl from U.N.C.L.E. moved fast.

As the *fer de lance* streaked across the carpet, its snaky body uncoiled and raised high now, and the forked tongue lancing out of the venomous, fanged mouth, the handbag in April's fingers exploded with a coughing splat of sound. The woman in the chair collapsed.

Noise echoed around the room, gobbling up echoes.

The *fer de lance's* ugly head vanished in a blaze of gunfire. The shapely balance of the lovely rope twisted on the worn carpet and was still. April dropped the scorched handbag and stepped over the snake to examine the woman.

She had fainted. April left her momentarily and hurriedly closed the door of the flat, locking it this time on the bolt-latch. Where in thunder was Mark Slate and what did this all mean? April felt her New England gorge rising. If Slate had merely been daisy-plucking and somehow the snake was part of some prank that had gone amiss—

No answers were forthcoming. A quick search of the room and the kitchen revealed nothing awry. It simply looked as if Slate had left the apartment without converting the bed back into a couch and locking the front door. April studied the windows. Nothing but the normal flow of bustling traffic stirred below. Gunfire could have been lost amidst all the hubbub but she couldn't be sure.

She realized bitterly that her English colleague had always been an enigma. U.N.C.L.E. often found it expedient to draw agents from other countries. April had known Slate only as a dedicated, conscientious agent, and there was no question of his loyalty. To April he had always been a big brother, preferring to get his kicks with other girls. That was all well and good but—

The redhead was stirring.

April walked over to her chair.

She was sobbing now, head back, breathing fiercely. Her gorgeous figure was slowly being released from the grip of terror. April gave her time to unwind, as she examined the high-cheeked, full-lipped, sensual face. Was this Mark Slate's kind of woman? April admitted that she really didn't know that either. April was a 34x22x34 brunette, but Mark had never laid a hand on her. Or was this one of *Them*—caught in a web of her own making?

The woman's eyes met hers suddenly. April gauged her age as somewhat short of the Thirty league.

"If you hadn't come when you did—" The woman shuddered, her voice, in which April detected a continental accent, fading.

"Dead lady spy?" April finished the sentence for her.

The woman shook her head violently, the mass of red hair tumbling down her shoulders. "I don't know what you mean—who are you, anyway?"

April's smile was friendly but her eyes were cold.

"Oh, no, Sweetie. My turn to curtsy, your turn to bow. Who are *you*?"

The redhead licked her lips, seeing for the first time the dead carcass of the *fer de lance* only two yards from where she sat.

"Arnolda Van Atta. I'm a translator at the UN. Oh, my God—" She put red-painted fingers to her eyes and shuddered again. "I never dreamed that Mark was mixed up in things like this!"

"Mark?" April said lightly. "Who's Mark?"

"Mark Slate," the woman said from her muffled mouth. "He lives here. We're friends. I stopped by to see him. The door was open. Then as I was in here, deciding to wait for him—you see, I was certain he may have just gone for cigarettes in the candy store downstairs—that, that—*thing*—"

"I get the picture. You were a lady-in-waiting and the snake walked in. Look at me when I'm talking to you, Miss Van Atta. I must talk to you. I want to watch your eyes as you answer."

That seemed to register like a slap in the face. Arnolda Van Atta's face flamed angrily. She glared up at April.

"Who are you to ask so many questions? You're acting like a policeman." Her eyes were bold and challenging but April stared her down. Decoys were nothing new in the espionage game. And a pretty face was always to be suspected. But a *fer de lance* as a death weapon was indeed an innovation. Especially in twentieth-century Manhattan. And this classy chick would have been right up Mark Slate's street.

"I am Mark Slate's dearest friend," she said evenly. "His not being here bothers me. I wish you could make my mind happy about his well-being. I just love the way he plays the guitar."

"I can't—I don't know about his comings and goings."

"You'll forgive my bad manners, I know, but I don't believe you."

"I don't care what you believe! I am going—"

Arnolda Van Atta was starting to rise, but April placed her right hand on the cashmere shoulder and quietly slammed her back into a sitting position. The redhead gasped.

"Who are you—really?"

"The Avon Lady. And I'm giving away free samples if you answer all questions correctly without me having to twist your arm off."

Before the redhead could answer, the phone shrilled into life. April recovered her scorched handbag, leveled it at Arnolda Van Atta and juggled the receiver to her ear, expertly. She didn't take her eyes off the redhead.

"Mr Slate?" a voice asked.

"Mark zero, Mr Waverly."

"Oh—Miss Dancer. I take it you have not found Mr Slate?"

"No, sir. Only a dead snake and a live lady."

Mr Waverly's voice was very tired. "Look no further for information about Mr Slate. We have word of his whereabouts. It's not good. Check back here immediately."

April held her breath. "How bad?"

Waverly sighed. "He's not dead, if that's what you mean."

"See you shortly," April said, and hung up. An almost dizzying sense of relief charged through her. At least, Slate was alive.

Arnolda Van Atta was showing signs of hysteria, now. April recognized the symptoms because she had seen them so many times. A delayed reaction to the threat of the snake, enhanced perhaps by the aiming of the handbag at her ripe figure.

"Hang onto yourself, Sweetie. Rise and shine. We are getting out of here before some neighbors or police inquire, however belatedly, about the latest thing in handbags."

"I can't," Arnolda Van Atta protested. "I'm due at the UN at one. There's to be a special session on the Vietnamese situation—"

"We have our own situation to translate into common sense. And your help is needed. March."

"But—" The redhead began to splutter.

"I'm getting tired of repeating myself, Miss Van Atta."

The redhead rose to her feet, her skirt wrinkled, the cashmere sweater riding high. A gleaming patch of naked midriff showed charmingly. April sighed. Why were THRUSH lady agents always so damned lovely? She didn't for a moment believe the fairy tale about the UN. For all his secrecy, Mark Slate would have mentioned a dish like this one some time or other in the past.

Good old THRUSH. Ready to strangle, beat or kill you at the drop of a snake. The secret organization with roots buried all over the

world, just waiting to make their move for world domination.

"You don't believe what I told you," Arnolda Van Atta said coldly, when they had locked Slate's door and April nudged her toward the stairs.

"No," April admitted. "But I'm open to logic of any kind. And I have been known to change my mind. Lady's privilege and all that sort of thing." She didn't comment on the small, irritating mystery that the redhead had no purse of any kind about her person.

"You're a fool," the redhead hissed. "Even if you did save my life."

"Yes. But I'm not a perfect one. After you, Miss Van Atta."

The redhead moved ahead. Tall, vibrant and athletic. Her figure was enviable. April shook her head, watching the sensuous twitch of buttocks beneath the beige skirt. The legs were superb, too. Miss Van Atta was a body built for bed.

As they started down the poorly carpeted stairs, April's sixth sense was working overtime. Not a solitary soul had come running to investigate the explosion of her handbag. That couldn't be right. Something was wrong with such an abnormal amount of things-going-on-as-usual in an apartment house. She couldn't even hear a child squalling or a TV set blasting.

She had her answer before she and Arnolda Van Atta reached the ground-floor level.

There was suddenly a rush of bodies, figures, men, crowding the front door which had been flung open. She stopped on the staircase, pulling Arnolda Van Atta to a full halt by tugging on the cashmere sweater. The redhead blurted "Oh!" and froze a step below her.

Three men stood on the threshold staring up the stairs at them with an intensity that was unmistakable. They looked so curious that April involuntarily raised an eyebrow.

They had fanned out, in a cordon, to block the door. Their faces were grave, solemn, almost animal-like in fixity of purpose. And menace.

A turbaned Hindu stood there. Bearded and imposingly tall like a Sikh warrior, he wore civilian clothes like a uniform.

The second man was a Chinaman in mandarin robes, with both hands out of sight, tucked into long, voluminous purple sleeves.

The third wore the traditional beret, slacks and Basque shirt of the French apache.

Outlandishly emblazoned across each chest front was a gaudy sash of some kind, blatantly advertising ROMEO'S LEAGUE OF NATIONS EXHIBIT.

Talk about the United Nations. This THRUSH threat came in three different languages. April poked the handbag around Arnolda Van Atta's trembling shoulder and waited.

"Stay where you are," the bearded Sikh boomed up the stairwell. "We have come for you too, Miss Dancer."

Death in Three Languages

Arnolda Van Atta whimpered like a nervous schoolgirl. April moved quickly. Before either of the three characters in the doorway had produced a weapon, she had whipped the redhead back, encircling the slender waist with her left arm. Her right hand snaked over the cashmered shoulder, shoving the automatic handbag front and center for all to see.

"Will the real Thrush agent please stand up?" she called down the staircase. "I've got a secret weapon."

The Sikh scowled fiercely at his companions and then leveled his gaze upward. White teeth flashed in his swarthy face.

"What is your friend Slate's life worth to you?" he bellowed in his more than passable English.

"Loads," April said, keeping the redhead from twisting out of her grasp. "But he knows the rules. No bargains with the competition."

The fantastic trio had approached the foot of the stairway. They now stood a mere seven steps from April and Arnolda Van Atta. The apache, a tawny, lion-faced man with an Errol Flynn moustache was poised as though to spring. The Chinaman, a bland and inscrutable cliché, smiled almost happily. The Hindu laughed harshly, his spade beard wagging.

"You will not shoot in cold blood. You are too scrupulous. As are all soft-hearted, weak Americans."

"Don't count on that," April leveled coldly. "Our soft hearts disappear when dealing with rats. Now, all of you, over against the wall. Quick, now. I must remind myself to report this apartment house to the police department. No sense of civic duty and pride. Not one head poking out of a doorway to see what's going on."

"The building is surrounded," the Sikh said simply.

"Sure. And so was Custer. But he took quite a few Indians with him. You want to try for a last stand? Back, I said."

She edged Arnolda Van Atta down the stairs ahead of her, flourishing the handbag gun. The outlandish trio moved to the side wall, raising their hands slowly. Even the Chinaman had unsleeved himself. Arnolda Van Atta stumbled once, falling back against April. She could feel the hard metal band of a wristwatch or bracelet of some kind scrape the soft skin of her left hand.

The redhead cried out. In fear, in apology. April growled and followed her down the stairs.

And suddenly, swiftly, the lights of the hallway began to flicker and coalesce in alarming waves of shadows. April swore under her breath. It was too late now but she realized what had happened.

Grimly, she flung Arnolda Van Atta violently from her tight hold. The redhead sprawled headlong to the floor of the hallway, white legs flashing. April sagged against the wall, raising the automatic handbag. Even as her numbed fingers tried to do something about blasting away at the Sikh, the apache and the Chinaman, she knew with a sinking sense of doom that she wouldn't be able to—

Their faces and figures wavered before her, tilted alarmingly and then blackness rolled in. It was in this negative state of mind that her eyes closed and she toppled on the stairs, unconscious. The black tam on her head rolled down the steps.

"Quickly," the Sikh barked. "There is little time left." The apache and the Chinaman galvanized. They clambered up to April like agile monkeys, straightened out her limp figure. The Chinaman hurriedly produced a roll of poster-size paper from beneath the folds of his purple robes. Arnolda Van Atta rose stiffly from the floor, evened out her skirt and sweater and red hair with quiet, almost majestic satisfaction. A hard, cruel light shone in her green eyes.

"I thought I'd never get the chance to needle Miss Uncle," she remarked tersely. "She never let me get close enough."

The Sikh glared at her. "How is that? You could have hidden a dozen places in that apartment."

Arnolda Van Atta's eyes glinted with fury. "Small matter of a snake nobody mentioned to me, my friend. This woman saved my life."

"Snake?" The Sikh was too busy with the manner in which the Chinaman and the apache were preparing April Dancer for the street. "Speak plainly."

"No time now," the redhead snapped. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"*Wah, Missy Sahib,*" the Sikh boomed, no courtesy evident in his tone despite the title of honor. "Hurry, you two!"

So it was that five minutes later, passersby on East Twelfth Street were treated to one of the odd sights of the day. People stopped to stare, gawk and wonder, shake their heads and move on about their business. It was the sort of thing one could expect in these sickening times of national crisis and world unrest. What with young men burning their draft cards, civil rights mobs picketing City Hall, anything could happen in New York, and very usually did. What could this be but one more way to state an opinion—or advertise a theatrical enterprise.

Still, it was a lulu, all right.

A Chinaman and a French apache character carrying the body of a very American woman. As though she were a corpse. Her body was as stiff as a board. Ahead of them, stalked a majestic Hindu, turban, beard and all. At his side walked a strikingly beautiful redhead. Tall

and proud. The body of the American woman was tented with one of those sandwich-board posters so that the same message could be read from either side of the street:

WAKE UP, AMERICA!
OUR BOYS ARE DYING IN VIETNAM
SO ARE CIVILIANS!
WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO ABOUT IT?

The curious quintette, boldly proclaiming the presence in town of ROMEO'S LEAGUE OF NATIONS EXHIBIT, but not saying exactly when or where, turned down a side street and approached a large blue panel truck which was parked in front of a store that sold typewriters. The flat sides of the truck also advertised the fact that ROMEO'S LEAGUE OF NATIONS EXHIBIT was an enterprise on wheels.

Within seconds, just scant strokes of time away from the advance of one very inquisitive cop on the beat, the group had entered the truck and driven off. The redhead and the Hindu were seen to sit in the cab of the vehicle while the Chinaman and the apache entered the rear with the woman who was playing the role of the corpse.

The driver of the truck was an enormous Negro with visored chauffeur's cap and tremendous brown hands that dwarfed the steering wheel.

"You took your time, snake charmer," he rumbled crisply to the Hindu. "We may get a lecture about this delay."

"Drive," the Sikh commanded coldly. "We have succeeded and no one will quarrel with that. Not even Riddle."

Arnolda Van Atta flung him a sideways glance. "Riddle? When did he get in?" Her lovely, classical face became a mask of surprise.

The Sikh laughed hollowly, pleased that he had piqued her interest.

"Riddle is the answer to everything."

Romeo's blue panel truck merged with the flow of traffic on the East River Drive and headed North. The water lay like unbroken glass in the pale sunlight.

The driver hummed a Dixieland tune as he played with the wheel.

On the hard wooden floorboards of the van, April Dancer lay inert. The powerful drug which Arnolda Van Atta had injected into her hand via the platinum wrist watch, kept her drugged and unconscious. Her lithe figure was as supine as a felled tree.

The apache had relieved her of her handbag, personal effects, and even her bra (without having had to undress her). The bra had proven to be of black silk with a curious flexibility. The apache was certain that it was as innocuous as the other secret weapon. There was no

telling until certain tests could be made.

The Chinaman was industriously examining a hand grenade—an American make, U.S. Army M-1. He handled the grilled, egg-shaped object deftly as his slanted eyes regarded the shapely beauty at his feet. A flicker of male interest shone in his expression. The apache leered at him, and pushed an expressive thumb ceilingward. Both men smiled at each other and continued with their own private business, and thoughts. On both sides of the panel truck, a veritable arsenal of weapons stood on view. More grenades, Thompson submachine guns, land mines and an amazing amount of drums and ammunition bandoliers. The blue panel truck was a veritable armory on wheels.

In the cab, the Negro driver still rumbled his disapproval aloud to the Hindu leader of the operation.

"Riddle, huh? Then you'd better make your story twice as good, Swami boy. Riddle doesn't like to be kept waiting on everyone to make his next move. You know what a fanatic he is on Chess. Knight to Queen Three and all that jazz."

"My name is Bora Singh," the Sikh said caustically. "You will do well to remember that. I do not care for nicknames."

"Sure, sure," the driver chuckled, winking at Arnolda Van Atta. "Bora Singh. That and fifteen cents will make you head of THRUSH some day."

Arnolda Van Atta folded her arms and stared straight ahead. She said nothing. Her green eyes were far away and remote. Bora Singh lapsed into a hostile silence. The driver hummed his Dixieland tune again.

The blue panel truck whipped on toward the Bronx.

Mr Waverly controlled his nearly feverish impatience and studied the teletype streamer once again. The yellow ribbon of communications felt like a hot potato in his lean fingers, and was more indigestible for a man in his position to swallow. *Section IV, Intelligence And Communications*, had rushed the message to his office as soon as it had come in.

It was decidedly unpleasant reading matter:

> IF YOU WISH MARK SLATE BACK ALIVE, WE AGREE TO EXCHANGE HIM FOR ZORKI. A FAIR TRADE IS NO BARGAIN. CONTACT GRAND CENTRAL STATION, LOCKER 705, FOR FURTHER DETAILS. NO LATER THAN MIDNIGHT TODAY.
>
> MISS EGRET

There it was. No doubts about it. A plain black and white swap. Agent for agent. A valuable agent like Mr Slate for the Great Zorki. The information about Slate had come over the teletype thanks to a suit of brown clothes being left by the pressing iron in Del Floria's tailor shop downstairs. So THRUSH knew about that too.

And Miss Egret was involved again. The mysterious Miss Egret. Sometimes, Dr. Egret, many times, a mysterious, faceless woman who could assume a wealth of disguises. The range of her operations and triumphs for THRUSH was simply incredible.

Egret. The most dangerous bird in the wide spectrum of the THRUSH aviary of espionage.

Mr Waverly frowned at the tiny watch on his wrist.

April Dancer had not put in an appearance yet. The events of the morning and early afternoon had left the usually implacable head of U.N.C.L.E. in a highly charged state. For once, he had found no comfort in fondling his world collection of pipes. It made one almost take up the foul tobacco habit again.

Oh, U.N.C.L.E., Where Art Thou?

"Wake up, April," a familiar voice said. "You look a sight."

Somebody was speaking in a low, unhurried voice. It was a gentle sound, for all the wryness and sarcasm in the words. Like the soft wash of sea water against a friendly shoreline. Yet, there was a penetrating quality to the voice. A dispassionate strength as subtle as cold steel. This, as well as the familiarity of the voice, made April Dancer open her eyes.

"Good morning, Mark," she said cheerily, long before she was even able to assess her condition, position and senses. "For a time there, I thought you'd gone back to the British."

The room swam into focus. The mocking, intelligent features of Mark Slate bobbed into view like an apple in a dunking game. She saw now the lank sandy hair, the sensitive eyes and the mobile mouth. Slate's handsomely rugged face blurred for an instant, then filled out. A photo developing in a dark room. April blinked, shaking herself. Beyond Slate's face, she made out the outlines of a wall where it met the ceiling. She struggled for a second, separating what had happened from what was happening. She had a vague memory of a nasty redheaded woman with an assortment of United Nations villains. A Hindu, a Chinaman and an apache. The stairway. The needle injection from whatever Arnolda Van Atta was wearing around one wrist. Clever. She groaned and sat up. Wasn't too bad. Must have been a drug like Sodium Pentathol. She had no after effects, save a great lethargy.

"Heaven or Hell?" she asked; they were in a blank, four-walled cubicle devoid of all furnishings. Behind Mark Slate stood the framed square of a doorway.

Slate smiled and she saw for the first time that he was wearing nothing but a T-shirt and boxer shorts. The shorts were firehouse red —typical Mark Slate flamboyance. "All good agents decidedly to to Heaven, April. Since we are not dead, this inevitably is purgatory. What happened to you?"

April stared down at herself. They had reduced her to her unmentionables. Black silken panties and the matching bra. But something had been done to the bra. She could feel the difference. It had been de-activated; the tensile fabric which could be reformed into a fine line of spun steel that could have supported a grand piano had been removed.

"The dorm at Radcliffe was never like this," she sighed. "Disgraceful the way they treat the opposition these days." She smiled at Mark, glad at least that he was still alive. "You, first." She had no

compunctions about Slate seeing her garbed in her underthings. The big brother demeanor of the wry Briton was still all too plain.

Slate shrugged. "Simple. There was a knock on my door. A redhead entered, jabbed me with a hypodermic needle and here I am."

"I met the witch. She jabbed me too. Do you know Arnolda Van Atta? Nice name for a witch, isn't it?"

"Is that milady's name?" Slate's expression was bleak. "We hardly had time to make introductions. I did so want to make her a cuppa."

"Why did you let her in?"

"She had a most persuasive calling card, beside her red hair, green eyes and that smashing figure of hers. A .45 caliber automatic."

April stood up, flexing her muscles. Apart from the slight chill and demoralizing state of dress, she felt no ill effects from the drug. "I see. Wonder what she did with the .45? I didn't see that on her. Mr Waverly sent me looking for you when you didn't show up at Headquarters." It was useless to go into details about snakes and the UN brigade. "Any idea where we are?"

"Yes. The sunny Bronx. One of my jailers, a talkative Negro, was injudicious enough to mention Southern Boulevard. From what little I know of this delightful borough, that is a main artery of the Bronx."

"Check. Runs North and South." April looked around the room. It wasn't large at all. No windows, no furniture, plaster walls, a boarded floor and the door. The floorboards were ancient. "Well, they took our clothes, including shoes, which leaves me feeling kind of helpless."

"Not quite," Slate whispered, his eyes rolling to indicate the room might be bugged. "I was able to trigger the homing device in my shoe before they undressed me. You see, I was conscious when they entered me in the nudist colony. We came in a blue panel truck."

"That's fine," April said aloud. "Have you any ideas what this is all about?"

"Certainly. We do have Zorki, don't we?"

"The Great Alek Zorki," April agreed. "Their most valuable man in New York. You think a trade is planned?"

"A fair trade, April. Though I must confess I don't know how fair it is. Two of us for him. But wouldn't that strike you as the only jolly conclusion for us not being dead yet?"

"Our friends from Thrush, then?"

"I would make book on it, to steal a very abominable Yankee phrase."

April laughed. "You ought to put on a few pounds, Mark. You look undernourished. Get some of those lady friends of yours to cook some good meals for you." She walked to the wall, running her hands across the plaster. It felt thick and substantial. "This could be an apartment house building. The flooring is the sort that is featured in most of

those cheap tenements they crowd the poor into. I wonder—"

Mark Slate, who was really as lithe and supple as an Olympic athlete, looking ready for a javelin throw, eyed her questioningly. April shook her head. "Guess we just have to sit and wait until out jailers decide to powwow with us."

"I would say they are powwowing with Mr Waverly as of this moment."

April sighed. "Hate to put the old man on the spot like this. You know how he disdains to put his emotions on the line."

"Perish the thought," Slate said grimly. "He'll make no deals with Thrush."

She knew Mark Slate was right. Mr Waverly, apart from his great respect and fondness for them both, would think twice before making a deal with THRUSH. Especially when the prize was a big fish like Zorki. Zorki was the key to the entire New York organizational setup of THRUSH. Waverly was more than likely to stall and see what could be done about the magnetic homing device in the heel of Slate's shoe. Every U.N.C.L.E. agent was equipped to let Headquarters keep tabs on their whereabouts. A steady electronic blip would register on the large map screen in the Organization Room and all of Security would be alerted. But had their jailers destroyed their clothes? If that had been done, there was no chance left of the troops coming to the rescue. Also, if—

"*Lady and Gentleman, your attention please!*"

Instantly, they both started, their bodies responding reflexively to the abrupt sound of a man's voice that seemed to emanate from the four walls. Yet, there was no box, no amplifier, no vent or opening through which a voice could be piped.

"*This is Mr Riddle speaking. We have not met nor will we ever. I feel it incumbent upon myself to explain your presence here, and the utter helplessness of your status. I will give you five seconds to adjust your senses to the sound of my voice before continuing with what I have to say.*"

April stared at Slate. The voice coming from nowhere was friendly and impartial, almost like the bland, emotionless voices one heard at airports announcing flight arrivals and departures.

"All of your clothing and personal possessions have been examined. Therefore, do not hope that any of your devices and gadgets will serve as lifesavers. Alas for you, we have burned your clothing and dismantled all your arsenal weapons. The homing devices and electronic transmitters will gain you nothing, as they have been destroyed. The explosive compounds and jellies which you managed to carry about your person are no more. Most ingenious, I would say, were it not for the fact that it merely duplicates our own inventiveness. Further, I will add, there will be no one coming to see

you or talk to you, lest you manage some miraculous escape. You will remain as you are until U.N.C.L.E. agrees to our offer. As you may have guessed, we are arranging an exchange of agents. It should come as no surprise to you that the release of Alek Zorki is our main objective. Since you both had a hand in his apprehension, it is somehow fitting that you should also be the instrument that affects his return to our ranks. Therefore, rest easy, try nothing foolhardy and do stay away from the door of your cell. It is electrically charged and sufficiently high-voltage to render you very dead in less time than it would take to turn the doorknob. I really do hope you will both be sensible and remain patient. If I were you, Mr Slate, and I were left alone with a woman of Miss Dancer's obvious charms, I should certainly know what to do so that time did not hang heavy on my hands. *Au revoir*, Mr Slate and you, Miss Dancer. May we never meet again."

The room was suddenly silent once more. The flat, bland voice had vanished as quickly as it had come.

"Isn't he sweet?" April said, low.

Mark Slate, eyes thoughtful, nodded. "Very friendly type."

April sat down on the floor and looked at the toes of both her feet. Mark Slate did likewise. Without a word to each other, they began to inspect the nails of each of the toes on their feet.

They worked quickly and fluidly, hardly looking at one another. If Mr Riddle could have seen them, he would have imagined they were quite mad.

"Mark," April murmured, working the thumbnail of her right hand against the big toe of the corresponding foot. "I know how to solve a riddle."

"Roger," Slate chuckled. "But how did your Benjamin Franklin discover electricity, really?"

"Easy. You go fly a kite."

Security had given them the last desperate measure of self-protection. Underneath their bantering conversation, to allay the suspicions of any of the enemy who might be listening—they were both scraping enough polish off their nails to produce five ounces of X-757. This extremely volatile explosive chemical, manufactured by the research laboratory of U.N.C.L.E., was a harmless substance until wadded into a compact ball. Once ignited, it could fuse a steel door into molten metal.

Mark Slate, however, now asked the vital question:

"Can we *match* that?"

"We," April Dancer said firmly, a humorous light in her warm brown eyes, "shall try."

Bora Singh, his spade beard wagging fiercely, stared across the battered metal desk, at the man sitting there impassively, with hands pyramided together. At Bora Singh's left, Arnolda Van Atta, her flaming tresses gleaming brilliantly in the lights of the room, sat quietly. She seemed to be studying the long, slender fingers of her own hands. Bora Singh was a tower of rage. His turban bobbed as his tall, warrior's body quivered with indignation.

"Are we children that we play games with one another?" Bora Singh was bellowing. "Why must you wear that ridiculous mask? Don't you trust me?"

The man behind the desk, his face hidden by a Frankenstein monster mask, such as are sold in novelty shops all over America, shrugged. The shrug did not match the fixed frozen leer of the rubber monster face.

"Calm down," the man said. It was the same voice which had mysteriously filled the bare prison room that housed April Dancer and Mark Slate. "Control yourself, Singh. Thrush has its own methods. My face is not to be made known to you."

"Riddle," Singh sneered, his dark face contorting as if he wanted to spit across the desk. "Very well, then. But why the delay about Zorki? We have the U.N.C.L.E. agents. Why must you procrastinate?"

The Frankenstein face said nothing.

Arnolda Van Atta shifted in her chair, looking up. Her classic face, so proper for the cover of *Vogue* or *Redbook,* became ugly.

"Simmer down, you turbaned hothead. Whose brilliant notion was it to plant that snake in Slate's apartment?"

Bora Singh looked at her. A wicked smile split his beard and moustache, framing large white teeth.

"A diversion. Why not? You will admit it would have kept the Dancer woman very occupied until we returned?"

Arnolda Van Atta's green eyes went cold. "Yes, and it very nearly killed me."

"Who asked you to interfere?" Singh snarled. "Is this woman's work? You should have left the room as soon as you rendered the other one unconscious. Why did you loiter?"

"That," the redhead said, "is none of your affair, Bora Singh." She lowered her eyes and reached into a large, corduroy clutch bag now visible on her lap, as though wanting a cigarette.

Mr Riddle coughed through the mask. The sound was incongruous, coming from behind the Frankenstein face.

"Bora Singh, you should really not get too excited about these things. Nor must you concern yourself with the movements of the rest of our agents. Surely, you realize that Thrush has many heads, hands, arms and legs. You are but the East Indian representative in this

enterprise."

Bora Singh glowered at the rebuke.

"Riddle, I must protest. Since we have all been allotted this Zorki mission, I cannot see why we do not have a mutual share of interest. Was it not myself who arranged this Romeo's League Of Nations Exhibit as a cover for the kidnapping? How else could we have gotten away so easily with two prisoners in broad daylight?"

"Yes, yes," Mr Riddle said almost abstractedly. "An ingenious piece of work. But now comes the finer, more subtle business of arranging the trade with Uncle Headquarters. I prefer that you stay out of that part of it."

The Sikh wagged his awesome head, eyes blazing.

"And I say I will not! You and the woman here are glory-seekers! You think to load yourself down with honors to curry favor with Central Headquarters. Therefore, I protest. You understand me?"

"Yes," Mr Riddle said mildly. "I understand."

"Good. And you—" Bora Singh whirled to glare down at Arnolda Van Atta. "What is your decision, *Missy Sahib?*"

Arnolda Van Atta smiled up at him.

"A simple one, snake charmer. You want a medal and you're going to get a bullet."

Bora Singh blinked. "What's that, woman? You dare to threaten me —"

Mr Riddle laughed. "Yes, I think that's best, Arnolda."

"Fine," she said lightly, and took her hand out of the large clutch bag. A mammoth .45 Colt automatic, Army issue, seemed to train itself at Bora Singh. For a second, the Sikh stood his ground, then he blurted in fear and tried to run, breaking for the door behind him. He had not gotten further than three feet away before there was a muffled, yet somehow thunderous burst of sound.

There was no nicety about the murder.

The heavy bullet caught Bora Singh in the back of the neck just below where the white border of the turban met his shoulders. He flew against the doorway, propelled by the impact. His hands pawed briefly at the panel before he fell heavily. He was very dead by the time he hit the floor.

Arnolda Van Atta replaced the .45 in her clutch bag. She looked at Mr Riddle, eyebrows arched.

The Frankenstein mask nodded.

"I rather thought that would be necessary, Arnolda."

"It was," she agreed. "Very. Tell the truck driver to get rid of his body in the usual way."

Mr Riddle made a steeple of his fingers again.

"Charleston will like that. He didn't care for our dear departed Bora

Singh."

"That makes two of us." Arnolda Van Atta regarded her fingernails again.

The Frankenstein face regarded the crumpled mass that Bora Singh's body made on the floor. The mask wobbled as he shook his head.

"It is always amazing to me to see the amount of trouble a man can get into when he doesn't use his mouth judiciously."

"Yes," the redhead said. "It is something worth remembering, Mr Riddle."

The man behind the mask seemed to shudder visibly. His voice now sounded almost tentative. "Perhaps I should check on Mr Waverly. He has the communiqué. We should—"

"Get Charleston first and have him move the Hindu out of here," Arnolda Van Atta said quietly, still not looking at him.

"Of course, Arnolda."

She stretched suddenly, raising her long arms, yawning attractively so that her bosom was sharply defined in the cashmere sweater. Her smile was mocking.

"Our friends from Uncle must be very restless with their clothes off. I wonder if they are making love."

"It is a good idea," Mr Riddle agreed, reaching for an enamel buzzer set in the surface of the metal desk. "One that a beautiful woman such as yourself would think of."

She made no comment to the compliment and studied the right forefinger of her hand. She had broken the bright red fingernail.

Mr Riddle spoke quickly into the tiny transmitter affixed to the buttonhole of his left lapel.

Within a matter of minutes, the Negro truck driver pushed into the room. His eyes widened when he saw the corpse, then a wider smile eclipsed his cocoa-colored face. An irreverent light twinkled in his eyes.

"Charleston," Mr Riddle purred. "Put Bora Singh away. Acid treatment, since we don't want to use the furnaces."

"Stepped out of line, huh?" Charleston chuckled. "Knew he would. Too big for his turban. Just like I said. Who popped him?"

Mr Riddle's Frankenstein face still showed only the frozen leer but his voice said: "Miss Van Atta did the honors."

"Good girl," the Negro chortled. "You got class, lady."

He bent down, poking his big hands under Bora Singh's armpits. Arnolda Van Atta watched, no emotion visible on her cool face. Charleston hummed softly as he worked, adding some words as he swung the dead Hindu astride his broad shoulders. "*Way down upon the Swami River....*" Mr Riddle laughed mirthlessly. Blood from Bora

Singh's blasted skull dripped to the floor.

The laughter halted only because of a large, explosive rush of sound from somewhere outside the room. The walls rocked with thunder. Plaster cracked. Arnolda Van Atta uncrossed her shapely legs and sprang erect. Charleston paused in the doorway, Bora Singh's body draped over one muscular shoulder. His eyes popped with fright.

Mr Riddle came from around he desk. He was very tall. Tall and cadaverous. A gaunt, skeletal sight with a Frankenstein face.

"It's them," Arnolda Van Atta said in a low voice. "That came from their room—those damn Uncle swine—what have they done now?"

The question hung unanswered as echoing bursts of sound raced around the room.

The room seemed to tremble with violence.

The Great Zorki

"My compliments, Mr. Zorki," Alexander Waverly said. "Your colleagues place the highest price on your services."

The man with the head of a bull glowered across the polished glass of Waverly's desk. His savage black brows met in a V of impatience.

"You mock me?"

Mr Waverly shook his head, his professorial facade mild and good-natured.

"One does not mock an agent whom Thrush would go to such great lengths to return him to the field, my friend. No, I do not mock Alek Yakov Zorki. I would be a fool if I did. I am all too aware of your triumphs with Thursh."

Zorki's bestial face, framed in a skull that was a living portrait of the charging bull rampant, smiled. His massive shoulders, enhanced by the gray turtleneck sweater which accented the thickness of his neck, hunched forward. His teeth were grotesquely small and even in his big face.

"So, my dear Waverly. The bargaining has begun then?"

"Yes." Waverly indicated the yellow streamer of teletype on his desk. It lay on the blotter pad between the two men—the difference between life and death. It was an odd afternoon to think about morbid combats: sunlight flooded the picture window of the office, revealing the glass architecture of the buildings in the background. Countless windows, reflecting the sun, glistened like emeralds.

Zorki, staring past Waverly's lean shoulder, seemed mesmerized by the view, like an immigrant viewing the Statue of Liberty for the first time. But the head of U.N.C.L.E. was not deceived.

This was Zorki, a man who had been to America too many times to be mistaken for a guileless foreigner. The same Zorki who had sabotaged the waterfront situation, delaying countless cargoes of supplies crucial to the running of a democracy. God knew what else.

Alek Yakov Zorki. KKK on the books. Code name: *Bomber*.

The agent's eyes glittered. "Have you agreed to the terms?"

Waverly pursed his lips. "Not yet. We must talk first. A fair exchange is no bargain—I've heard that somewhere. Your people have one of my best men. Perhaps they now have two. A most unique young lady you may well remember. I prize these people very highly. But I fear I may prize you even more. Therefore, I must think a little longer on the matter."

Zorki snorted. "And how much time do you have to—think?"

"Midnight today. Your friends suggest I contact a locker in Grand Central Station."

"Ah, yes. Grand Central. I nearly blew that place up once. It would have been a glorious thing. Think of it. New York's vital traffic bogged down for weeks, months."

"Perhaps," Waverly murmured. "In any case, I didn't bring you in here to discuss your exploits for Thrush."

Zorki's bushy eyebrows rose.

"So? To specifics then. Are you going to agree to the terms?"

"No," Mr Waverly said. "I am not." He stared down at the tips of his spatulate, leathery fingers, then searched the top of the desk for one of his pipes. But there were none there. Only the row of enamel buttons of all colors. Zorki followed his gaze, impatiently. "You see, my dear Zorki, I am fearful of your health. A man such as yourself must often catch colds. I have found that true of most large men of my acquaintance."

"Bah," roared Zorki. "What are two agents compared to the Great Zorki? A mere man and a woman—"

"The man," said Mr Waverly, "is impulsive, a bit of a nonconformist but he is highly skilled and intelligent enough to be a candidate for this very desk one day. As for Miss Dancer, apart from being dedicated to good work, she has poured every molecule of her being into the fight against cosmic evils like Thrush. She's a bit penurious—her Maine background—but I find that refreshing when it comes to turning in expense accounts. Miss Dancer actually is worth five of you to me, Mr. Zorki. But we were talking about your health, were we not?"

Zorki leaned out of his chair, his arms resting on the lip of the desk. His small eyes were angry. "What is this nonsense about my health?"

Waverly's eyes met his, a slight smile tugging his mouth.

"Don't you notice anything peculiar in the air? A bit of a chill—?"

Zorki frowned, his nostrils curling. Suddenly, a look of dawning wonder flooded his bull face. He gazed about wildly, then he tried to rise. Too late, he sensed the subtle, cool fragrance about his chair. It was then and only then that he managed to push up from the chair. He cursed, clawed at his throat briefly and fell over backwards, missing the chair. His heavy body thudded to the soft carpet of Mr Waverly's office.

Waverly hardly gave him a glance. He thumbed the yellow button on his desk. A female voice, issuing from seemingly nowhere again, abruptly crackled with sound.

"*Section Six, Mr Waverly.*"

"Send Mr. Wilder in, please."

"*Yes, Mr Waverly.*"

He pressed another button on his desk. The green one. This

activated an air current that issued from the edge of his desk and kept the gas that had knocked out Zorki from reaching him. Waverly steepled his fingers, sat back in his chair, and waited.

A door on his left, cleverly merged with the pale umber color of the wall, opened with a slide of panel, and a man stepped into the office.

Mr Waverly spun about in his chair and scrutinized the newcomer carefully. As if by prearranged signal, the entrant to the office stood at attention and said nothing.

Yes, Wilder would most certainly do. Only Zorki's mother could have told them apart.

Security and Enforcement Agent James Wilder was the spitting image of Alek Yakov Zorki. It was more than the similar costume of rough tweed suit, gray turtleneck sweater and plain, scuffed shoes. The bull head, massive shoulders and the artfully made-up face, would definitely serve to fool anyone coming as close as five feet. The Lab had once more performed one of their highly specialized tricks.

James Wilder turned around for Mr Waverly's benefit, walked a few paces and then paused, cocking his head. As his chief studied him for defects, he too scarcely paid any attention to the man on the floor.

"Good, Mr. Wilder. You'll do. Concentrate a bit on that flinging of the head. Our dear Zorki's bullishness is one impression he leaves with the most casual acquaintance."

"Right, sir."

"Now I suggest that you find our sleeping friend a cell to sleep it off in. Continue to study him until eleven tonight. All details, all physical mannerisms. Using a glass mirror, of course. By that time, we will have formulated our plans for the midnight rendezvous with our other friends from Thrush."

Wilder came further into the room and bent over Zorki. He rolled the heavy agent over on his back. Zorki made not a sound. Wilder's smile was bleak.

"Sleeping like a baby."

"Yes," Waverly nodded. "The depression of the cushion on that chair he sat in is rather unique, I think. Harmless enough but most effective in releasing the gas. Took a bit longer to work this time. Have the Lab check out the formula for possible flaws. It took nearly five minutes to incapacitate Mr. Zorki."

"Right, sir." Wilder paused, as he slung Zorki to his shoulder. "Any word on Slate and Dancer?"

"No. That will be all, Mr. Wilder."

Mr Waverly turned to look out the picture window. The panorama of the East River and the shore beyond was always a pleasing sight. It had a soothing effect on whatever strain he experienced in his duties

for the organization known as U.N.C.L.E.

He was upset now, though his headmaster's manner indicated no such thing to observers like James Wilder, who was already removing Zorki's bulk from the office. It was one thing to dupe the enemy and prepare a fine plan to rescue two valuable agents, but he was all too aware of the duplicity of THRUSH.

What if April Dancer and Mark Slate were already dead?

For one tiny second, he wistfully wished that Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin were not thousands of miles away in Rangoon on that infernal ray affair.

He tried not to think about that as he watched the sun's rays dance off the numberless windows on the opposite side of the river.

April Dancer and Mark Slate were a team, too. As such, they would have to play the game. The game that can be lost just once.

The deadly game of Spy, U.N.C.L.E., Spy.

Don't Blow Your Top

The corridor was empty.

Behind them, the fused, crumpled door, a twisted testimonial to the effectiveness of X-757, now revealed the glowing chamber, their recent cell. The hallway stretched ahead, long, dark and unknown. No light gleamed. In the shadowy gloom, April Dancer could see the pale blur of Mark Slate's half-naked body. The woman in her made her grin wryly, despite the situation. There was something indecent about having to operate without a full set of fig leaves.

Silken panties and bra were not exactly the standard uniform for U.N.C.L.E. assignments, either.

"Where to now?" Mark Slate whispered.

"Let's wait till we hear a noise. No sense in playing blindman's buff."

It was a good idea. No hue and cry had been raised since the muffled explosion of the door. A cemetery silence filled the corridor. A silence more discomforting for the noisy blast that had preceded it.

A darkened corridor was ideal for the onslaught of sudden attacks. Especially when one had not the faintest notion which way led to freedom.

They didn't have a weapon between them. THRUSH had seen to that. Good old reliable Mark, who seemed to think of everything sometimes, had had the good sense to secrete a tiny blasting cap in the hollow of his armpit. It was that and that alone which had triggered the wadded clump of X-757 in the door jamb. But what now?

"Mark—"

"Yes?"

"Listen—"

From somewhere at one end of the corridor came a click of noise. April tensed, clutching Mark Slate's forearm in warning. They both froze where they stood. No door had been opened that they could see; no telltale light lit up the darkness. Yet they both knew from long experience that *someone* was in the corridor with them. Perhaps, more than one—

April felt the barest influx of air playing over her flesh. It had to come from an opening of some kind. Then it was gone. The trickle of wind came from the gloom just ahead of them, no more than fifteen feet away. April flattened against the wall, straining to listen. She pushed her long dark hair back, away from her ears. She kept herself from trembling, concentrating on the source of the sound. This was a typical THRUSH maneuver, this baiting-in-the-dark. She remembered

ruefully the way they had bottled up poor Donegan in Granada. The abandoned air shaft of an old apartment house. Donegan hadn't had a chance, either.

She was dimly aware of the sound of Mark's breathing. Or was it the enemy's? Too hard to tell. She couldn't risk a whisper now. She had almost lost sight of the pale blur of his body. Where exactly was Mark?

Had someone decided to traverse the width and length of the corridor with scathing bursts of machine-gun fire, they wouldn't have had a chance in a million. Either of them. Therefore, that could only mean one thing. The enemy was in the corridor with them. And they were wanted *alive.* That was worth knowing, but—

Far too late, she sensed the rush of bodies. She tried to scuttle back in the darkness. And then a hard knee rocketed from nowhere, ramming into her stomach. The air shot from her lungs. Tears sprang to her eyes; a fierce stab of agony filled her middle. She staggered, only to feel herself vised by a pair of arms which should have belonged to a gorilla. She shook herself violently, trying to dissolve the waves of shock. But it was too soon. She allowed herself to fall forward against her assailant, smelling the sweaty nearness of an enormous, muscular body. From somewhere, she heard Mark Slate's clipped voice blurt something. Then there was a savage series of smacking, thudding noises, suggesting a terrible fight at close quarters.

Someone else cried out in pain and terror. A blue shaft of gunfire lit up the darkness, briefly, as a streak of lightning ignites an overcast sky. And then April was too occupied with her own troubles to think of anything else. The dry, acidic taste left her mouth and her senses cleared.

Her heavy assailant mashed her in a crushing embrace. She allowed herself to sag further. Now, her attacker, well aware of the softness and pliancy of the curved figure in his hands, roved with his brutal fingers, mixing pleasure with business. April gritted her teeth, shifting her weight into a dead, unstruggling mass. The attacker made himself more comfortable, lessening his fierce hold slightly. April tightened like a bowstring, flipped quickly and her legs levered like scissors. There was a startled curse and the heavy body, anchored at the waist by suddenly lithe and superbly conditioned legs, crashed into the wall.

April broke free and regained her feet.

The gorilla had been deposited somewhere behind her. She braced herself for a return onslaught. It came. A second animal-like charge. She sidestepped but the corridor was too narrow. A wedge of a shoulder clipped her and the man collided with her. April hugged him,

in order to avoid a killing kick in the groin.

A hoarse, angry laugh echoed close to her ear. Hot breath washed over her face. There was a rough, tweedy feel to the man's clothing as it chafed against her exposed flesh. She shot a hand into where she knew the face to be, fingers pronged. Another howl as she found the target. She lowered her head and butted. The distance wasn't great for maximal effect but it served. The gorilla's grip loosened as his head snapped back. But he grunted and hung on.

April pushed fear out of her mind. She had run up against a man who had at least ninety pounds on her. Ninety pounds and years of experience as a back-alley fighter. This was obvious from the gouging, corkscrewing motions of the man's hands as they ground cruelly at her flesh.

It was impossible to use her legs now. She was cramped like a pretzel beneath a mammoth opponent. Desperately, she kept her arms high to protect her face and throat. The gorilla added pressure.

"I'll make you say Uncle, baby," his low, gutty voice chortled near her ear.

The sound was all April needed. It measured the distance for her. Swiftly, she reared her head, butting again. There was another howl, followed by a curse. For one precious second, the tight hold about her loosened. She heaved and followed through, slashing savagely with a stiffened palm, driving her right arm out from the shoulder like a pile driver, exactly the way a Karate expert drives through the thick slab of a wooden door.

A hideous gurgle of sound, ending in a tingling, snapping sensation at the very socket of her armpit, told her how successful she had been. The gorilla's body swept from her like a chaff of wheat in the wind. A crash signaled the fall of his heavy body to the floor of the corridor.

April sagged against the wall, her right arm limp and useless. She strove to clear her head of its blurred agony. Her heaving breasts strained at the bra. Her heart was tom-tomming.

The corridor had remained dark. Only now was she conscious of the sudden, terrible silence. Mark—

No, the silence was not healthy. She had to find her way out. She needed light to see by. She staggered down the dark corridor, toward the direction from which the gorilla and his friends had come. There had to be an entranceway somewhere.

She came up hard against a barrier of some kind. She pushed out with her hands. A door fell inward, exposing a bare, drab, basement of sorts. There were low-running water pipes, damp cobbles from another era of New York living and a cracked porcelain sink filled to overflowing with cobwebs and the soot and grime of years of disuse. The light that illuminated the interior of the basement was daylight.

Pale, dirty daylight, streaming through a high window that was grilled.

April moved warily into the basement, breathing hard, her body on fire with fatigue and pain. Her eyes roved rapidly. She sniffed the air, experimentally. She waited for some sound, anything, that might alert her faculties. But there was none. All of her training in the U.N.C.L.E. Academy, where she had graduated with honors, plus her actual experiences on assignments, had taught her how to read the atmosphere of a room, a building—a place.

There was no mistaking the aura that hovered over the basement.

The birds from THRUSH had flown. It was quite obvious that they had taken Mark Slate with them, once again. She moistened her lips, reflecting. How could they have? True, she had been occupied in the corridor with Tom Too-Many Thumbs, but she had seen and heard nothing to indicate Mark Slate's mysterious disappearance. How could they have gotten him out of that corridor without her hearing something? There had to be another exit then—it was all too confusing. April, fighting the agony of her bruised shoulder, found it hard to assemble her thoughts.

But there was a time to fight and a time to run for cover. Hadn't Napoleon Solo told her that more than once? She had to choose an alternative course of action. For one wild second, a sense of doom dominated her. Damn Mark Slate, damn THRUSH—

Why had THRUSH chosen to take Slate and leave her behind? It didn't make sense. There had to be some explanation for such a move. After all, hadn't they been keen to make a swap for Zorki? They were surely lessening their chances against Mr Waverly's concern for his agents by kidnapping only one. Unless—

Grimly, April ran to the doorway leading from the basement. A door on the far side of the dank area. It wouldn't budge. Her eyes roamed to the grilled window, far above her head, where she could just make out the ancient, cracked sides of a stone building adjoining. The grilled window stood twenty feet above her head, inaccessible except to someone with a ladder or to Superman. Biting her lips, a nervous habit she gave in to only when she was alone like this, she reentered the darkened corridor. She roved with her hands and feet in the gloom. As she had expected, it was a blind alley. The wall ended against the door of the room that had served as their jailhouse. No, the only way out of the basement was the locked door. There was no telling just how much of an impossible barrier that was.

They had locked her in.

She had no outer clothes, no weapons, no tools. None of her fancy devices for extricating herself. The nail polish explosive X-757 had been the last arrow in her bow. That's all there was; there was no

more.

They knew that.

So what could it mean—that they had chosen to leave her behind?

It was at just about this time that she began to realize that the basement and/or the building was expendable. They would probably never need to use it again. THRUSH had a "scorched earth" policy; they liked to burn their bridges behind them, once they had used them for a purpose. Burn them or *blow them up.*

The building had to be wired for an explosion. It was all too clear, now. A dead U.N.C.L.E. agent was much better than a live U.N.C.L.E. agent, no matter what yardstick THRUSH used.

April shivered in her panties and bra, responding now to the chill dampness and dankness of the corridor and basement.

Where was the bomb?

When would it go off?

The curious blue panel truck with the painted sides that bore the legend ROMEO'S LEAGUE OF NATIONS EXHIBIT, traveled smoothly in the heavy traffic throttling Grand Concourse. It turned off at 161st Street, roared past Yankee Stadium and bore rapidly toward the Harlem River Bridge.

The beautiful redhead at the wheel, a white ribbon pony-tailing her vivid tresses, stared straight ahead, mindful of the jammed lanes of cars going South. Beside her, the man with the Frankenstein child's mask sat with his arms folded serenely. Passing motorists and people on the pavements, glimpsing the offbeat couple, as the truck stopped for red lights, grinned and waved. The redhead and Frankenstein and the blue panel truck were a novelty in the prosaic Bronx afternoon.

"I'm not convinced it was clever leaving her back there," Mr Riddle said, without any complaint in his voice.

"Slate is sufficient to arrange the trade," Arnolda Van Atta said. "Miss Dancer can't be much more than a female. I wasn't too impressed with her."

"But if Uncle learns of her death before—"

"They won't. There won't be enough left of that old dye factory to put in a stamp album. Her body could never be identified."

Mr Riddle looked at the Timex watch strapped to his left wrist.

"Five minutes more," he said crisply. "I wonder if we'll hear the explosion from here?"

Arnolda Van Atta laughed harshly, spinning the wheel to bypass a slow-moving Cadillac.

"If the noise bothers you, I'll have Thrush send you some earplugs for future assignments."

Mr Riddle said nothing. Only the gruesome mockery of his

Frankenstein face seemed to smile in approval of the remark.

"What about the other woman?" Mr Riddle asked unexpectedly.

Arnolda Van Atta shot him a look. "What about her?"

"If Miss Dancer should find her—"

His superior, for that is who Arnolda Van Atta clearly was, laughed again. It was an ugly guffaw that held more invective than a sentence full of oaths.

"If she does, so much the better for her. Perhaps, before they both get blown into infinity, they can tell each other all about the men in their lives."

The paneled truck roared on toward Manhattan, its brightly painted sides as gay as a carousel in the waning sunlight.

Mr Riddle had only one thought.

He would hate to have been a woman who had raised a spark of envy or jealousy in the heart of a terrifying female like Arnolda Van Atta.

She was a tigress with long, jagged claws that needed, wanted blood.

Demanded it.

Dancer With Cold Feet

In the quiet of the basement, April dressed quickly. She didn't know what drove her to such modesty, except that you couldn't run around town in your underthings, could you? If there *was* to be a time when she would be out of this damnably cold basement.

She had scavenged the trousers, shoes and shirt of the giant assassin in the hallway. It was robbing the dead, of course. When she had dragged the supine man into the light of the basement, it had been quite obvious that she was toting a corpse.

The Karate blow at such short range had smashed the man's larynx and broken his neck in the bargain. She didn't like to kill but she couldn't think twice about it, either. It was that kind of a profession, being an U.N.C.L.E. agent. You or them. It was a much better arrangement when it was them.

She had entertained some hope that the victim possessed a weapon of some kind. But there was none, the man's pockets holding no more than the usual loose coins, keys and a wallet. These and identity cards in a plastic case indicated that in life, the corpse had been one Clyde C. Charleston, a New Jersey truck driver. Beyond that and his Negroid lineage, she knew nothing. Possibly some poor recruit whom THRUSH had inveigled for the use of his vehicle. The woman in her was fully glad that the wicked Mr. Charleston seemed to have been a bachelor, also.

The trousers and shirt were baggy, swimming on her slender, compact figure. Her feet were lost in the shoes too but they would serve. Time now for an examination of the basement. A true, thorough, painstaking search to discover the bomb mechanism she was certain had been left as a legacy to her. Wasn't the Great Zorki a specialist with explosives? These were his friends.

Soundlessly, swiftly, she checked the place. The rusting pipes were a maze of thick, crisscrossing snakes running at all angles about the room. The cracked porcelain sink, large as it was, revealed nothing. The cobblestones of the floor all seemed secure and undisturbed. The very walls, limned with grease and layers of grime, revealed the desolation of abandonment in the long, long ago. No, there had not been any life in this place until recently. Perhaps this very day.

There was a row of thin, dilapidated metal lockers, lined up like soldiers on the opposite wall. April debated with herself briefly. She could knock the lockers over, and pile one on top of the other, to form a height sufficient to reach the grilled window. Yet, she was as certain as she was of her shoe size that once she attained that giant step, she would be no better off. The barred window opened on an alleyway far

from the sound of human ears. She was sure of it. Still, there wasn't enough time, to squander on guesswork. She could be mistaken about the bomb, of course—but she didn't think so.

She had nothing with which to tackle those bars on the window.

Suddenly, she heard a *sound*—and froze, senses alert.

A vague, almost far-off whisper of noise. She cocked her head, listening. Now the noise grew louder. A scratching, pawing sort of sound.

It was coming from one of the metal lockers.

Mark? A feeling of jubilation surged through her. Was it possible Slate had dashed in here.... The sound abruptly materialized as a whimper. A human moan of despair. That wasn't Mark Slate. You couldn't have gotten a sound like that out of him if you nailed him to a barn door.

There was no mistaking now the sobbing murmur of a woman's voice.

She stepped rapidly to the locker cabinets, and waited. The sound came again. Muffled and indistinct, but a woman's moan all the same. It seemed to be coming from the third battered file on the line. April moved to the tinny door, jiggled the damaged handle and pulled it back.

Almost timed to the gesture, the woman crammed inside, her figure distorted from the narrow confines of her prison, fell forward. April caught her. She had a fleeting glimpse of untidy brown hair, cut in a boyish bob, a piquant face and a shapely arrangement of curves encased in a winding sheet of some kind. The sheet came apart, grey and molding, to reveal a torn, tattered blue dress of a wooly texture.

The woman, girl really, squirmed in her grasp, her arms fighting the folds of the sheet. She settled on the basement floor.

"You—you—" she gasped, breathing deeply.

"Me, me," April agreed. "Do you usually hide in closets? You don't look like an old maid."

She plucked the remainder of the crumbling sheet away from the girl so that she could sit up. She watched as the girl caught her breath. No matter how smudged and sooty the face, there was no hiding the gloriously creamy skin. Her eyes were dark and flashing, her mouth a fine cherry bud. The nose was *retroussé.* All in all, the last person April would expect to find in a battered tin locker in a damp old basement in the middle of nowhere.

The girl brushed at her cheek, nervously. "You can't be one of them. You wouldn't have let me out—"

"By them, you mean Thrush?"

The girl nodded, her eyes frowning at April's unusual garb of oversized male clothes. "Have they gone?"

"Yes. Leaving me here to wonder what surprise they have in store for me. Who are you, Alice-Hide-in-the-Closet?"

The girl shook her head, pushing to her feet.

"I'm just somebody they don't want on their hands anymore."

April studied her. "That means you are either from Internal Revenue, Discarded Lovers Incorporated or Enemy Agents, Unlimited. Which is it?"

The girl winced. "I can't tell you."

"All right. We'll discuss that later. Do you know anything about bombs?"

Her eyes opened fearfully. "They haven't—no, they wouldn't do that—this place was one of their best hideouts in the city. Oh, unless—they did pack all their supplies in that blue panel truck!"

"Ah." April smiled, as little as she felt like it. "Then perhaps you'll rack your newly air-conditioned brain and try to think where they might have left some explosive forget-me-not for both of us?"

"I can't," the girl wailed. "I just don't know. Oh, are you sure? If they do that it means the end of my assignment and—"

April shook her head.

"Honey, you haven't been listening. If there's a loud noise in here, we will both have no tomorrow."

The girl swayed, falling back against the sink for support. She saw the faucet and the tiny drip of a globule of water from the rusty tap. "I'm so thirsty," she whimpered. "I need some water—" She looked around for a glass, her eyes almost glazed. April could see that she still hadn't quite collected all her faculties. She might have been sealed in the locker for a long time.

But something the girl had said held her. It set off a bell in her brain, an alarum of warning that meant something. Something important.

"Water," April echoed. "Say that again."

"Water," the girl flared. "I want some water. What's so peculiar about that?"

April Dancer smiled. It had come to her. Yes, the only solution to the bomb she could not find.

"Yes, water. I want some too. Lots of it, honey. All the water in the world."

So saying, she turned on the tap full blast, making certain to employ the rotting rubber stopper to close off the drain. The girl watched in bewilderment as April clambered like a monkey toward the crisscrossing maze of pipes. April stood on her toes to crank one of the large round valve handles. Suddenly, from a broken section of piping, rust-colored water shot down to the cobbled basement floor, rushing like a cataract to meet the walls of the room. April came down

from the pipes, raced to the locked door, whipping off the shirt she had wrested from the corpse and stuffing it effectively into the crevice where the wood met the stone floor. She looked around the basement like a wild woman, spied another valve and busied herself once again. The strange girl shrank back against the lockers, frightened by this maniacal behavior. But April persevered. She was moving like some galvanized mechanical toy, setting all the water outlets in the basement to full power.

THRUSH had left the water power on. She meant to put it to good use.

The girl shivered, moaned again, as the wet, rusty waves washed over her shoes, staining her silk stockings.

"What are you trying to do?" she whispered. "Drown us both?"

April was grinning from the center of the basement, admiring the slow but definite rise of the water level. Her long hair was quite wet and dangling now but the grim smile that played about her mouth was almost a happy one.

"Water, water, everywhere," she quoted, "nor any drop to drink."

The girl goggled at her. "That's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*—what is *your* name?" She was whispering again, as if to assure April that she was ready to trust her, no matter how erratically she was behaving.

"April Dancer here. Performing the Gunga Din ritual. I generally work for an organization known as UNCLE."

The girl's eyes bulged.

"U.N.C.L.E.?" she spelled quickly. "Well, why didn't you say so?"

"You didn't ask me. But we girls have to stick together. Now, honey, you are—"

"Paula Jones," the girl said. "Joanna Paula Jones. But I prefer Paula so don't laugh, please. It's a name my father gave me because he was in the Navy for forty years. Oh, dear. What's the use! I'm with U.S. Naval Intelligence, Miss Dancer."

April couldn't resist a smirk. She gazed about them at the water building on all sides. The cast iron legs of the sink were slowly being submerged under the force of the rising tide.

"You're in your element, Miss Jones. And we do have the lockers, too. However, back to my request. It's very necessary that we stay as close together as possible. I expect some concussion, perhaps a tidal wave to tell the truth. We'll be better off like two peas in a pod. Topsy and Eva, you know."

"But where," Joanna Paula Jones blurted, "can we go?" It was as if she understood for the first time why April was banking everything on the water. "We still don't know where they put the thing—if there is a *thing*—"

"No," April said soberly, taking the girl's hand and leading her toward the lockers. "But let's play my hunch. To be on the safe side."

The Jones girl tried not to cry, following April dumbly, letting herself be led to the lockers once more. April knew the classic symptoms. First big assignment. First big scare when a girl realized she could actually get killed playing Spies. She urged the girl on quickly. Below all her own banter, a facade against terror, she was genuinely worried. A lot of valuable time had elapsed. Suppose the water didn't rise fast enough? What if the bomb were planted elsewhere, other than in the basement?

She pulled one of the lockers toward the furthest corner of the basement. Far from the center of the room, far from the clutter of the place. It was a risk against uncertain odds, but it was the only hope for survival.

The water would help.

If there was enough time.

Joanna Paula Jones laughed suddenly. A merry, skittery little laugh that made her body vibrate like a tambourine. April held onto her tightly, as she pushed her into the metal locker and made room for herself. It was a tight squeeze.

"Laughter in Paradise, Miss Jones, or are you getting a case of hysterics? I'll slap you if you really need it."

"No," the girl muttered. "It's just that this would be exactly like dying at sea, wouldn't it? Dad always wanted me to stay away from ships."

"Sardines," April Dancer said, cramming herself into the narrow space beside her new acquaintance, "do not die at sea.'"

Joanna Paula Jones stopped laughing and buried her face on April's shoulder. Her figure shook. April held her tight, cradling the boyishly bobbed head against her shoulder. Behind them, she could hear the roaring, rushing *slap-slap-slap* of the rust-colored water as it angrily crested the top of the porcelain sink.

What if the water went *over their heads before the bomb detonated?*

How jolly.

That, she had to admit, was something that had never even occurred to her.

Alek Yakov Zorki came awake with a slow start. He blinked as he caught sight of the smooth, perforated ceiling. His cell at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. Of course. How long had he slept? He craned his neck and stared about the cubicle. There was the chair, the plain deal table. The chrome decanter of water. The locked door mocked him. Curiously, he had no recollection of falling asleep. He dimly remembered an interview at some earlier time in the day with

Waverly. That pedantic fool. With his tweeds and his English fair play and school-tie nonsense. What did he know? How did such men rise to power? Still, it was disturbing to return to wakefulness like this, with the sensation of having lost a day

He sat up on the cot, flexing his large shoulders. He felt his face. He had never had much growth of hair on his skin so it was difficult to assess the amount of time lost as other men could. He had no watch. They had seen fit to strip him of all his personal possessions and assorted equipment. Well, why not? Were he in their place, he would have done nothing less.

He did remember somehow that Waverly had not been too amenable to the plan to make a fair exchange of agents. He, Zorki, for the U.N.C.L.E. captives. Chort Znayet! The Devil Knows. Would Riddle and the Van Atta woman ever succeed? He had begun to doubt even the vast superiority of THRUSH itself. A simple affair like this and he sensed it was being bungled all the way.

What was the delay?

Sighing grumpily, he reached into his inner pocket for the cigarettes they had allowed him to keep, after properly fluorescing the contents of the pack, and each cylinder of tobacco, under their special infrared light devices. It was when he reached for one of the butts that he first noticed the white business card inserted between the cellophane and the package proper.

Amazed, Zorki held the card up. The light of the cubicle was dim. When he saw the small, hand-stenciled words printed there, he could barely restrain a bleat of joy. It said:

BIRDS OF A FEATHER FLOCK TOGETHER
EGRET

Zorki, aware that his movements in the square cubicle might be under a closed Television circuit supervision, stifled a yawn and extracted a cigarette. He was proud of the fact that his hand did not shake with the excitement he felt.

THRUSH was here! In the very heart of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. Somehow they would liberate him. Free him to go on with his great plan to institute the program that would assuredly guarantee the domination of the civilized world.

Da, THRUSH would fly over the world. As befitted the eagle of the skies.

If he had had any doubts about the organization's belief in himself and his plan, they were totally dispelled by the greatest consideration of all. It was a tremendous honor, all in all.

Dr. Egret was tending to his escape herself.

The legendary, terrifying, extraordinary woman who was all that THRUSH itself stood for.

Clean Slate

Mark Slate was very unhappy. It didn't show on his angular, handsome face. The Briton was one of those men who have the ability, usually something they have worked hard for years to attain, of keeping a poker-faced countenance. This control of his intelligent features, and the wry amusement usually found in his eyes, was something that not even his closest associates at U.N.C.L.E. had ever been able to fathom. Including his fellow agent and dearest chum, April Dancer.

To Mr Riddle, and Arnolda Van Atta, Slate's face was inscrutable. He might have been a Chinaman for all they could tell about him. The true Englishman has an almost Oriental indifference in his nature, thanks to centuries of wars won on the playing fields of Eton. Slate had gone to Cambridge, of course; he could be roasted alive before he would say as much as, "*Ow, that hurts.*"

The ride in the panel truck had ended.

Slate had come to, following a blow on his skull in the darkened corridor, to find himself in another complex situation. Someone had had the decency to outfit him in a pair of blue jeans and a Basque shirt of sorts. But the Christian impulses had ended right there.

He lay face down on a hard wood table, his arms spread-eagled and strapped with leather thongs to the front two legs. Similarly, his ankles were ringed and shackled to the other legs. He was puzzled by the crudity of his position until he saw the niceties of his predicament. He had to restrain a hopeless grin. THRUSH had its methods: this surely was one of the very thorniest.

By craning his face upwards, he could see directly in front of him. The sight was not heartwarming. The wall before him held a large, square recess which in turn displayed a .30 caliber Browning machine gun mounted on its tripod. The air-cooled kind of gun which American GI's used in the field. A gleaming ammunition belt fed directly into its breech from a wooden box stamped U.S. ARMY M-1. The nose of the weapon, with its peculiar, perforated barrel, was leveled directly at his face. He was literally staring into the mouth of the Browning. Further examination revealed that a length of black wiring ran from the trigger beneath the stock, ending in an attachment to one of the legs of the table below his outstretched body. A lanyard sort of affair. A tug on the wire and—boom! It did not take an Einstein to calculate the device; were he even to jar the table a fraction of an inch in the hope of freeing himself, the .30 caliber would open up.

A noisy demise and a messy one. Slate chose not to think about it.

He was too busy trying to determine the amount of time since he had last seen April Dancer.

He heard them come into his room not long after he had awakened. His keen ears picked up the sound of a woman's heels and the heavier tread of three men. They seemed to fan out around the table, surrounding him on all sides. Yet, he was certain they remained out of the line of fire of the Browning.

Lying like that, with his back exposed to them, a helpless target for knives, ice picks or worse, did not constitute the most charming moment of his life.

"Hail, hail, the gang's all here," he muttered, without emphasis.

"You're all of you fools!" the woman's voice said suddenly. He remembered the sound of her and the ruse she had used on him that morning to get into his flat. He despised himself for the simple way in which she had taken him. It was a lesson he would never forget. "The stakes are life and death and yet you and your lady partner waste everyone's time with glib remarks and pointless jokes."

"What else would you suggest, Miss Van Atta?" Slate asked. "A tea dance?"

The woman's laugh was short and brittle.

"We need you alive for the trade, for Zorki, Mr Slate. That alone has kept you in one piece. Other arrangements are being tried, should we fail. But that is of no consequence to you, just yet. Consider please your present physical condition. I'm sure you have correctly deduced what will happen if you move the table so much as an inch. So—it is now almost six o'clock in the evening. Uncle has until midnight to come to terms. Do you want to stay the way you are for six more hours? I think not. Consider my alternatives."

"What might those be?"

"You could give us many valuable details about your Headquarters operation. Disposition of personnel, door signals, the locations of alarm systems. Waverly's private entrance to the building. That is something we have never been able to learn. You tell us some of those things and perhaps we can make you more comfortable for the rest of your stay with us."

"Do go on."

"A soft bed, some good food, your favorite liquors and tobacco. We will even throw in female companionship, if you feel the need."

Mark Slate laughed a scornful laugh.

"What is so amusing?" Arnolda Van Atta snapped. One of the men in the room made a growling noise in his throat. "Stay where you are, Fried Rice. Let him answer me."

"My answer is no, Miss Van Atta. No, categorically, personally and with exclamation points."

A man's voice, on Slate's left, spoke up. He recognized the flat, bland tones of the man who had addressed him and April from nowhere visible in the prison room. Mr Riddle.

"It's useless, Arnolda. He fancies that his friend, Miss Dancer, will come running to his rescue. Let's leave well enough alone. Leave Fried Rice and Pig Alley to deal with him. We'll wait for Waverly's answer."

The woman chuckled a low, deadly chuckle.

"You're right, Riddle. He's a damn hero. But let's make him feel good about things. Fried Rice—do you have the transistor?"

"Yes," came a singsong voice. "You wish to turn it on?"

"I do. Get a six o'clock news broadcast. There ought to be something interesting to report, don't you think?"

Slate could not see the smiles that spread from face to face. Nor did he see the Frankenstein face of Mr Riddle. The other two men in the room were the Chinaman and apache who had trapped April Dancer in the hallway of Slate's building. *Fried Rice* and *Pig Alley* were their code names.

There was a crisp crackle of electrical noise, then a raising of volume. Slate frowned, the table top inches from his jaw. What were they up to? Why should he be interested in a news broadcast?

Arnolda Van Atta abruptly said, "Wait, wait—I think that's it now. Put the transistor close to Mr Slate's ear."

A bright measured voice was speaking. The clear tones seemed to echo in the room. Slate was riveted to the announcement :

"*.....a fire and explosion of undetermined origin in the Bronx today has alerted all fire departments in the vicinity of Bronx Park and East 180th Street. A five story building which had once served as a dye factory in the nineteen-thirties seemed to detonate with great violence this afternoon at approximately four-thirty five. Scores of windows, for a radius of ten blocks, were shattered by the force of the explosion.... In a moment, Sports and the Weather, after this message from....*"

"You can turn it off now, Fried Rice," Arnolda Van Atta said. The abrupt silence was excruciating for Slate. Yet his brash voice was unconcerned, light as he rested his cheek on the table and stared up at the ceiling.

"Awful waste of a good hideout," he suggested.

"The end justifies the means, Mr Slate. We left your Miss Dancer back there when we departed in such a hurry. There was no possible way for her to have gotten out. Unless she had wings."

"You misjudge April, old girl. She's an angel. A positive angel. The mistake is yours and the misfortune of Thrush, I might add."

There was a chortle from Mr Riddle. "Why do you bluff, you fool? The lady was blown to Kingdom Come and nothing you say or think will ever change, that."

"Bully for you, Mr Riddle," Mark Slate said drily.

Pig Alley spoke for the first time. "*Ma foi,* this madman has the guts! I would have liked for him to have been with me at Dien Bien Phu!"

"We're wasting time, Arnolda," Riddle said flatly. "Let's leave him to them and see about Zorki."

"No," she said. Suddenly, she took her forefinger and thumb, seized a patch of Slate's right shoulder just below the deltoid of the arm and twisted her fingers. She twisted hard but he did not cry out. He set his teeth and closed his eyes until she relaxed her agonizing pinch. A long sigh escaped her. She was breathing hard. If he could have seen her face, he wouldn't have liked the weird glint of her green eyes. "Idiots!" she hissed. "All of them—idiots! I'll take care of Mr Slate myself. But later. Not now. Come."

Riddle murmured something and there was a grunt or two of agreement from the others. Footfalls retreated from the table. A door closed. Slate let the tears of pain wash down his face and blinked them away. He could hang on; he would hang on, but the memory of the broadcaster's words haunted him.

He stared into the snout of the Browning .30 caliber machine gun.

He thought about his captors. Arnolda Van Atta. What a name for a bitch of a redhead. Mr Riddle. That flat, dead as dust, unemotional voice. A French apache called Pig Alley—well, he sounded true to the type. A Chinese named Fried Rice. He filed the information in his agent's mind. He had to admit, even to himself, that he might not live long enough to use that information.

Zorki. Would Mr Waverly go through with the swap?

April. Was April really dead?

He had to face facts.

For all agents everywhere—death came sooner or later.

He also wondered, almost with amusement, what Arnolda Van Atta had planned for him in the torture department.

He began to hum. He hummed softly and rhythmically, like a man who knows his music and can truly carry the melody. The little room filled with his low, vibrant voice.

A Rock 'n Roll tune that Elvis Presley had made world famous: "Blue Suede Shoes."

He found himself trying to imagine how the Beatles would have treated that particular number.

The War Room of the Pentagon building featured an enormous circular table of polished mahogany. The walls of the room were devoid of decor. A panel board of buttons rested on the table, just to the right of the chairman's seat. At all high level conferences and

meetings, these buttons made it possible to provide, suddenly, large colored strategic maps and various panoramic views of the globe. By electrical and mechanical ingenuity, the maps and views could be brought into view at a moment's notice. Very extremely clever architects, from the various branches of military service, had poured their creativity into the devising of this room.

At seven o'clock that evening in Washington, D.C., Mr. Alexander Waverly sat in conclave with the Joint Chiefs Of Staff. A specially chartered flight from Kennedy Airport had jetted him to the nation's capital. Mr Waverly had asked the Secretary of Defense to arrange the conference. The President was in California; he would not be needed until it was made precisely clear what had led the head of the U.N.C.L.E. organization to call for a Red Alert.

The heads of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps, beribboned, and wary of secret service organizations, all watched closely as Mr Waverly presented the problem. A hush lay across the War Room. It was like a unique conference in the Executive Suite of a vast industrial empire. This was business, too. The biggest business of all.

"—so there it is, gentlemen," Mr Waverly said stonily. "We have Zorki and Thrush wants him back. As I have tried to indicate in this rather elaborate report, Zorki is the key to the entire machination of Thrush in this country. If they get him back, there can only be the most dire consequences."

"Mr Waverly," the Chief of the Army rumbled. "If he's all you say, and none of us can doubt that, what's the problem?"

"They have two of my finest operatives as hostages," Waverly said, trying not to appear emotionally involved. "If a trade is not effected, the operatives will most certainly be killed."

"Wages of war, Mr Waverly. And, I take it, this is a war. I'm sure your men understand that and wouldn't have it any other way."

"They do," Waverly agreed. "One of them is a young woman, in fact. But I'm afraid I haven't made myself clear. I haven't come here to ask your advice on the advisability of a trade. That is out of the question. Zorki must be kept from ever returning to Thrush."

The Chief of the Army looked around the table at his colleagues as if seeking reinforcements for his argument. "He's a spy, isn't he? This is a national emergency. Why not shoot him? And may I ask what your organizational problems have to do with us? You have called us all away from our desks. I trust there is more to it than a mere local problem."

Waverly shook his head. "I am sorry, Gentlemen. Killing Zorki, apart from the fact that this country doesn't operate that way, would be too simple. He is far more valuable alive. He must be made to

defect from Thrush."

An irritated wave of voices washed around the table. The Secretary of Defense coughed politely, by way of interruption. He had an inkling of Waverly's problem, thanks to some private comments in the hall, prior to the conclave.

"Perhaps if you explained the qualities of this man, Mr Waverly, the Chiefs and I would be better able to offer suggestions."

The Chief of the Navy was oddly silent and thoughtfully watching the head of U.N.C.L.E.

Waverly considered for a moment, then nodded, almost to himself, as if deploring the necessity and then finding the Defense Secretary's request unavoidable.

"Yes, perhaps so." He gazed slowly about the circular table, eyeing each of these important men as if he could influence them with what he was about to say. "Alek Yakov Zorki is no mere *agent provocateur*, gentlemen. In our files he is listed under the code name of *Bomber*, letters KKK. Oh, he is highly skilled for all of of the typical agent's jobs of assassination, sabotage, propaganda and intrigue but he is far more than that. He is a scientist. We first came abreast of this fantastic man after World War Two. He had achieved a record of liquidating Nazis for the Russians that, to quote William Shakespeare, would make each separate hair on your heads stand on end. But, I am not concerned with his abilities to kill and destroy. It is his work in the Moscow laboratories which make him so important to a world organization with the devilish aims of Thrush. They wooed him away from the Reds. Second, these attainments make him someone to worry about. You see, Zorki loves field work. Bombings, sabotaging factories, destroying shipping, radar stations. There's a zest about the man that belies his more sedentary genius in the research laboratories. But it is that phase of his work which involves us. We never would have gotten our hands on him if he hadn't decided, almost as a lark, to come to New York to blow up the Verrazzano Bridge. He is a capricious man. We have him now but we also have nothing."

A murmur of surprise raced around the conference table. A haze of blue cigarette and cigar smoke hung over the room. Mr Waverly pushed out his lips. It was always difficult convincing the powers-that-be of the need for forceful steps and measures. But now was the time.

"Zorki has somehow found a chemical formula that defies all probability and yet we have incontestable proof of its existence. Yet, he has kept no papers, no records, no data on his work. In short, it is all in his head. The man possesses that rare phenomenon—a photographic mind. If we give him back to Thrush, he will surely give them the secret. He may never give it to us but at least, if he is in our hands, the secret is safe, allowing for the vast sociological difference

in the world aims of the United States versus Thrush. Therefore, we must keep him. Were he to return to them, I could not answer for the safety of civilization as we know it."

The Chief of the Marine Corps snorted.

"That's a mouthful of frogs, Waverly. What could be that big? Another cobalt bomb? Germ warfare?"

"No," Waverly said quietly. "We could combat those evils."

The Chief of the Navy looked less skeptical than the rest of his colleagues. A slow, unworried smile crossed his face.

"Mr Waverly, I've had some indications about your man, Zorki. Fact is, our own G-2 has been working on him but—you'd have to go some to top the bomb. Overkill is nothing new, you know."

"I realize that, sir, but what else is there to surpass the simple, unalterable truth that Alek Yakov Zorki, Thrush agent and scientist extraordinary, has discovered a chemical agent which guarantees *everlasting life?*" Mr Waverly phrased the words very slowly and very carefully. "Nobody will ever die once they are innoculated with this amazing solution. Life everlasting against the fast statistics of old age, accidents and even intentional homicide. Think of it."

The Joint Chiefs of Staff began to laugh. The low ripple of mirth played about the table. The laughter reached the Secretary of Defense. He bit his lips, and reluctantly rapped his gavel for silence. A sudden quiet greeted the hollow thud of the hammer, as if all the participants were somewhat embarrassed by their own reactions.

The Defense Secretary leveled a stern gaze at Waverly.

"You can prove this preposterous revelation?"

"I can, sir," Waverly said, without hesitation. "I wish to God I was in error."

"But that's absurd!" The Army Chief exploded.

"Incredible and impossible," agreed the head of the Marine Corps. "Why if—"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," the Defense Secretary cut in. "It isn't in our province to discuss the niceties of the matter. I'm sure we are all aware of the consequences of such a discovery."

"Precisely, gentlemen," Mr Waverly said firmly. "*They* go on living, *we* go on dying, in the normal order of things. And soon we would have a world of people who think alike and live alike for all time. Thrush people. Thrush conquerors and dictators. And Thrush, of course, will gain what it has sought since the very day of its birth. World dominance."

The Defense Secretary nodded.

"I'll talk to the President. This calls for an executive decision. Meanwhile, I suggest you take that plane back to New York, Mr Waverly. You hold onto Mr. Zorki until you hear from me. I'll

leave the details to you. I'm sure our Washington scientists will want to know all there is to know about this—ah—*discovery*."

"Thank you, Mr. Secretary."

The Chiefs of Staff exchanged hopeless looks and incredulous gestures. A man of some merit and obvious importance had said a most remarkable thing. Was it true? Could it be true—even in this amazing day and age?

"Proof," barked the Chief of the Army. "You mentioned you had proof. What kind of proof can you have of a thing like this?"

Mr Waverly stood up, bowing to the officials surrounding him. His leathery face was furrowed.

"The proof is Mr. Zorki himself. When we first got our hands on him, we put him through the usual tests. Physical, mental, etcetera. A Security precaution. There was an accident the first day in the laboratory. One of my men left a ray machine on which fires, literally, radium bullets. Mr. Zorki received enough radioactive particles to kill a roomful of people. He survived with no more than a mild headache. When we questioned him about it, he made his boast about his chemical. We believed him. The proof was before our eyes. That was about a week ago, and Mr. Zorki is still very much alive. Need I say more? Obviously, he himself is innoculated with this drug of his."

"I can think of an easier way to test him," the Army head growled. "Line him up on a firing range and cut him in two with some automatic weapons. Life everlasting! It's ridiculous, I tell you."

Mr Waverly had no more to say of an important nature.

"Thank you for your attention. I'll be going now. Please remember that we at Uncle will do all in our power to hold on to Mr. Zorki."

The War Room was quiet long after Mr. Alexander Waverly had left the table.

Not even the outspoken Army Chief dared repeat his infamous suggestion. As practical as it would be, the government just didn't operate that way, did it?

Outside the Pentagon building, a long dark touring car was waiting for Mr Waverly. He entered it quickly and settled himself in the interior. His kindly brown eyes were unaccustomably grim.

"Airport," he said tersely to his special driver.

The nation's capital lay quiet and serene in the gathering darkness; the mammoth illumination of numberless lights and glares gave the impression of an immense, lit-up stage where great dramas were about to unfold.

Mr Waverly's special car shot away from the curb, wheels spinning on the gravel, grinding almost in protest.

Away All Girls

The explosion, when it came, was something to remember the rest of one's life.

For April, it marked the beginning of a new appreciation for the effects of a detonation under water. She had gambled on the physical principle that liquid would dissipate the bursting concussion of a charge of explosives. She had counted on the rolling force of torrents of water, pushed by the powerful thrust of the blast, wherever it might come from, to collapse the walls of the basement. But she had not reckoned on the maelstrom that would ensue.

Eternities seemed to have passed since she and Joanna Paula Jones (Lord, what a name that was!) first huddled in the locker. The swirling, dirty waters had flooded their narrow stall, rising in a steady surge. It had sloshed against their chests, reaching their chins—a thunderous cataract of noise.... And then had come the biggest noise of all. A cyclonic, ear-pounding *whoooommmmpppp* of sound and fury. The world had turned upside down.

A skyrocketing, roller-coastering universe in which the heavens opened wide and the waters of the deluge carried them away like two bits of flotsam in a roaring ocean. Wherever the explosives had been planted, there was no escaping the waterfall. The watery room split into mountainous columns of flying foam and rubble. The locker cubicle that held herself and the girl buckled apart, the tin sides flying. Their two helpless figures whipped forward, like two grains in an elevator chute. Tons of water and wreckage poured through the collapsed walls of the building where the mammoth, gaping holes allowed them passage. April tried to hang onto something, sought to reach the girl, but it was useless. She was swept along on a tidal wave of such force that the breath almost burst from her lungs.

It was a mad miracle of daylight and darkness, life and death.

They were outside the building now, shooting along a narrow, dim alley, their bodies buffeted and catapulted like corks in the sea. April let her body relax and go limp; it was the only thing her training had left her as a conditioned reflex. The rest was confusion, and the exhilarating hope that she *might* get out of this mess alive. She uttered one last prayer that Joanna Paula Jones would do likewise.

Behind her, she sensed the thundering vibration of destruction. There was a cataclysm of violence and disintegration in the air. Then her lungs were full of the foul, wretched water. She sputtered, struck her hands out like flails, trying blindly to check her headlong propulsion. It was a veritable *Perils of Pauline* situation—

It was then that her head struck the cobbled sides of the building.

The rest was darkness in the surrounding fierce thunder of holocaust.

She awoke to the keening of sirens and an earthquake of sound. When she opened her eyes, she didn't know where she was. She lay quietly, composing herself. She counted slowly, waiting for the clamor in her bosom to slow down. She could feel her heart thumping.

She checked herself gingerly, expertly for broken bones and more severe injuries. Darkness surrounded her, intermittently pierced by the probing beam of a searchlight. She took stock of her surroundings; weariness throbbed through all the muscles in her body.

She was lying on her side somewhere, half of her soaking in water. She stared up; the cubed, dark outline of a span of concrete rose above her. A bridge. She was under a bridge, lying on a damp, muddy shore with her naked feet still extended into a low body of gently running water. She made herself sit up, conscious of a tingling in her limbs. Her arms and legs ached. Her ribs felt sore and bruised. She shook herself, trying to locate all the uproar and confusion of the night. It was not far away.

She lay back on her right side, studying the bridge ramp arcing overhead. Dark and ghostly. Beyond it, to the left, she made out a fiery hue lighting up the night sky. From one point, she heard the clang of sirens, the hoarse shouts of fiercely busy men. Dimly, she made out the tops of the green trees, forming a solid mass of cover to the East. She looked down the river and remembered where she was.

The factory. The explosion. Bronx Park. Yes, she had been hurled outward by the blast, carried through the wall, out into the alley and then—of course. She had been swept to the river and dragged along until her body had anchored in low water close to the shore, under this very bridge. She wasn't that far from the building. And the girl—

Joanna Paula Jones was nowhere in sight.

She raised herself stiffly. A sharp pain centered its hot knives in her right thigh, letting her know she had torn a ligament somewhere. She had gotton off easily, though. It was a miracle to be alive. The girl, obviously—

April then put aside the thought of her. She blocked out the bedlam that reigned some five hundred yards away. On her feet, she tested her legs. Stiff but they'd have to do. She hobbled toward an incline of ground at the side of the bridge. A paved walk lay in a wash of moonlight. As she had suspected, because of the bridge, she was close to a park exit. She fumbled at her soaked clothes. The baggy man's pants were like ridiculous balloons. Her bra, taut from immersion, was strangling her breasts. Firmly and with great effort, she tore the trouser bottoms below the knees and fashioned a

semiskirt to cover her torso. It was a farce but it would have to do. She had lost the oversized shoes that had adorned the feet of the man she had killed.

A dead smile dominated her battered, dirty face.

She wasn't exactly dressed for the Riviera though the costume could have been mistaken for clam-diggers and Bikini top. She was a ragged derelict, really, and she didn't even have the necessary dime to make a phone call to Headquarters. If she tried to bum a coin from people in the streets, the chances were they would shy away from her Bowery bum appearance. Yes, it was a great life for a girl. Still, she was elated to be alive.

The street was bereft of passersby, despite the pell-mell activity in the vicinity of the blaze. Or maybe because of it. April cut over the walk, toward Boston Road, away from the center of all attention. Ahead, the street lights glowed. Automobiles flashing by, hooted their horns derisively at her, taking her for some kind of kook. She stayed away from the fire. Nobody at the scene would have believed her. Least of all any tired Bronx policemen or far too busy firemen. No, she would have to get out of this mess on her own.

There was a cab parked at the intersection of 180th Street and Boston Road. April hobbled stiffly toward the driver, standing alongside his vehicle, munching a hot dog, watching the blaze lighting up the sky.

The cabbie recoiled when he saw her, raising his frankfurter as if it were a weapon, in self-defense.

"Mister," April said in her coolest and brightest voice though she knew she felt and looked positively *terrible,* "you wouldn't believe me if I told you I was a very secret agent who had to get downtown in a hurry and would see that you got twenty dollars for taking me there?"

The driver made a face. "Beat it, sister."

"I don't blame you. I'll make that fifty bucks if you'll do what I ask."

The man nearly choked in disgust on his hot dog. Sour-faced, he dug into his pants pocket and flipped a coin at April. "There. Don't bother me. You'll give me indigestion."

April caught the coin. A dime. Elation shot through her. She eyed the cab and the hackie's number on the badge pinned to his peaked cap.

"Thank you, Number seven-one-three-five-nine. This may be the nicest thing you have done all year."

"Sure, sure, sister. Beat it, wilya, or I'll call a cop!"

"Gently, sir, it's Mother's Day."

She blew him a kiss with her grimy fingers, winked and limped across the street to the luncheonette where the driver had obviously bought his frankfurter. The elevated subway overhead was just

disgorging a flood of passengers. April became the cynosure of all eyes as she walked into the luncheonette and headed for the telephone booth at the rear of the establishment

It didn't matter. So she wasn't the Queen of the May. At least, she had a dime.

A dime to call U.N.C.L.E. and get back to civilization again.

And get some decent clothes and a good hot tub before she forgot she was a woman altogether. She could smell herself. A foul smell.

There were only two things on her mind, really. And both of those were human beings. One male, one female.

Mark Slate. And Joanna Paula Jones.

The carpeted corridor was long and deserted. A trail of red plush headed toward the twin elevator cages. There was one lone closed door at the far end of the hall. This led to a fire stairway.

One of the elevator cages whirred open. Arnolda Van Atta stepped out. She wore a long green velvet dress that clung to her statuesque body in enticing curves. A pendant of jade stones hung about her slim throat, falling across the swell of her abundant bosom. The flaming red hair was wound into a sophisticated bun atop her classic head. She was radiantly, exquisitely beautiful. Looking at her one would find it hard to believe she was capable of the very most inhuman, cold-blooded acts.

Her green eyes glinted in the subdued lighting of the corridor. A cold smile etched her regular features into a mold of sheer iciness. The oddest of her accouterments was the black leather riding crop she held lightly between her slim, tapering fingers.

It was now eight o'clock in the evening.

She stalked down the hallway imperiously, halting only when she reached the smooth-paneled brown door to the left of the twin elevator cages. The smile on her face evaporated as she turned the knob and stepped inside.

Mr Riddle, Fried Rice and Pig Alley looked up quickly, stopping in the midst of a busy game of gin rummy. Mr Riddle still wore the Frankenstein mask. His lanky, cadaverous figure seemed more ludicrous than ever. But an aura of terror clung visibly to the man. Fried Rice and Pig Alley were unnerved sitting with such a parody of a human being.

But they feared Arnolda Van Atta more. They all did. It was apparent in the almost subservient way they lapsed into silence at her appearance. She drifted to the table, eyes gleaming, the riding crop waggling impatiently in her slender fingers.

"Yes, Arnolda?" Mr Riddle asked.

"Our man at Uncle has contacted Zorki. It seems Mr Waverly

intends to play games with us. Substituting a look-alike for our dear Alek Yakov." Her words were suffused with anger. "So we know where we stand. Waiting until midnight would be a farce now."

"What do you intend to do, then?"

"First I will deal with Mr Slate. Then we will leave this place and station ourselves at a point I designated to the man at U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. We'll get Zorki without making deals."

Pig Alley stared up at her now, wonderingly. "*Sacre,* but you are gorgeous, *ma chère.* What a charming dress!"

She ignored him and tightened her hands on the riding crop. She only had words for Mr Riddle.

"Wait for me here. I shall be no longer than an hour. You understand?"

"Of course," Mr Riddle's flat voice echoed hollowly in the mask. "We can play cards all night, if we must."

She laughed. A sarcastic, pealing laugh that had no humor in it. With that, she turned on her high heels and left the room. Mr Riddle's Frankenstein head stared after her.

Pig Alley's Errol Flynn moustache twitched. He was not too young a man but he obviously found Arnolda Van Atta astounding in more ways than one.

"Did you see her? Dressed like a queen! To what end—and that whip in her hands—" He broke off, confused, staring at Mr Riddle and Fried Rice.

"She always dresses that way," Mr Riddle remarked, picking up his hand once more and riffling the cards. "Usually just before she is about to do something extremely vicious. What a woman."

"Yes," Fried Rice agreed, his purple mandarin's sleeves flung back to allow him to handle his cards. "I do not envy Mr Slate the hour Miss Van Atta will spend with him."

Pig Alley swallowed nervously, dark eyes afraid.

"You mean she—"

"Sadism," Fried Rice said calmly enough. "She is a ruthless sadist. Thoroughly versed in the De Sade lores and customs. Come, cards please."

Mr Riddle, Pig Alley and Fried Rice went back to their game. Each of them tried to concentrate on what they were doing. But it was far too interesting to dwell on what the redhead would do to the man from U.N.C.L.E.

Had they taken an informal poll among themselves, they would have found themselves in unanimous agreement on one major point.

Whatever Arnolda Van Atta was going to do, it would not be nice.

April Dancer reached Del Floria's Tailor Shop just as the bells in

the church steeple five blocks away tolled the hour of eight. The taxicab driver's gift of a dime had accomplished a host of miracles. An excellent sedan, a Dodge with a motor that could achieve the speed of a Ferrari, had picked her up almost thirty minutes after her call. The driver was a tall, blank-faced U.N.C.L.E. chauffeur who made no comment about her odd appearance or battered condition. He merely drove cars and was prepared for instant duty and emergencies, as might be any one who drove an ambulance for a hospital.

Meanwhile, on the long drive into Manhattan, April had mended herself as best she could. There was a specially equipped cabinet in the rear of the sedan that came down off the wall like a dressing table. With this before her, she redid her face—washing, and applying restoring lotions and healing creams to her bruises. A complete wardrobe trunk, artfully concealed in the cushioned seat afforded her a smart, simple blue wool dress and regular pumps. By the time the sedan had reached the ramp at Pershing Square, she was, at the very least, extremely presentable once again. The only things that didn't show were the great aches and enormous fatigue that made her body scream for sleep. To combat this depressing feeling of lassitude, she sniffed freely for a full minute from a curious brown capsule. The immediate effect was one of head-clearing and complete recovery. It wasn't just spirits of ammonia or Benzedrine; it was something far more efficacious than that. Instant Wake-up, the Lab boys had labeled their discovery.

The tattered remnants of the dead man's clothes she consigned to a disposal unit on the floor of the sedan.

Darkness, pierced by neon, filled Manhattan as the sedan wheeled up to Del Floria's, literally the front door to the vast complex that made up Headquarters, U.N.C.L.E., New York.

There was a not unattractive blonde in a print dress operating the steam presser as April came in. The shop was small, neat and extremely orderly, but nothing to write home about. The blonde eyed April obliquely.

"Is my red dress ready do you know?" April inquired sweetly.

"Oh, yes. Right in there." The blonde gestured toward a dressing cubicle. April nodded to her and stepped behind the curtain that closed off a view of the shop's interior. The steam presser hissed as the blonde clamped it down again.

April waited in the cubicle, facing the rear wall. A steel panel slid to the left and she hurried through. The steel panel, actually one wall of the dressing room, closed again.

April heaved a sigh. Home again. U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters.

Before her lay the outer offices of the amazing complex. Steel files, a reception desk at which sat another woman. This one was a brunette

with sharp features and steady eyes. She smiled at April as she handed her a peculiarly shaped card badge which April pinned to the bosom of her dress.

Beyond this anteroom lay the elevators and then the honeycomb of rooms and offices which comprised the inner workings of the organization. April, still occupied with her fears for Mark Slate, now had only him on her mind.

"Will you buzz Mr Waverly for me, please?"

The brunette apologized. "Sorry. He left for Washington. Won't be back until ten or eleven, I expect."

April tried not to bite her lip. With the old man gone, she would have to take the assignment by the horns. God knew there was little time to lose.

"Then would you alert Section Two, for me? I'll be in the Weapons Room for twenty minutes and I'll be ready for a conference at eight thirty."

"Yes, Miss Dancer."

She paused a second longer before going on up to Weapons to rearm herself with the matériel and equipment that her capture by THRUSH had destroyed.

"Any word from Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin?"

The brunette's face warmed a trifle.

"They contacted us that they were leaving Rangoon tomorrow. That should put them back here by Wednesday at the earliest."

"Thanks."

April took an elevator that whisked her up to the Weapons Room. With Mark Slate *hors de combat* and Lord knew what else, it would have been a comfort to have had Solo and his Russian colleague on deck to call some of the shots.

This way, it all fell on her shoulders. Not that she lacked self-confidence. Far from it. It was just that she was willing to take all the help she could get.

On the way up in the steel elevator, she wondered who was left in the Enforcements pool that she could use. There was James Wilder, of course. Pete Barnes, Walter Fleming. Perhaps even Randy Kovac. No, Randy was still a trainee. Eighteen years old, smart as a whip, and almost *fey*, he was so Irish. No, no—this was no operation for a trainee. U.N.C.L.E.? Randy was still a Nephew.

She had reached the door of the Weapons Room when the truth descended upon her like a ton of bricks. Good Lord, what an idiot she had been! And all the time she had lost, just because she had been a half-drowned kitten lost somewhere in the Bronx. It had been staring her in the face all the time and it had just this moment come to her. The one possible way she could trace the whereabouts of Mark Slate

and his brutal captors. Her eyes blazed with anger as she realized her stupidity.

If anything happened to Slate now and they were too late, it would be her own fault. Nobody else's. She had goofed mightily—a luxury no agent could afford. Least of all, Mark Slate.

She raced for the communication set on the desk in the Weapons Room, nearly tripping in her haste. She batted the lever on.

"*Section Four*," a man's voice said.

This was the Intelligence and Communications Section. A most valuable arm of the organization.

"April Dancer here," she said crisply into the transmitter, all of her mental capacities focused on the very important information she was about to deliver. There must be no slipups, no forgetting of a single detail, if she were ever to see Mark alive again.

"*Yes, Miss Dancer?*"

"I have an All Points. We must locate, as soon as possible, a blue panel truck. The occupants are a Chinaman, a Hindu and a French Apache type. They are advertising a three-ring circus of some kind called 'Romeo's League of Nations Exhibit.' Repeat—" She went through the whole spiel again, itemizing every detail of description she could remember. The Hindu's beard, the Errol Flynn moustache on the Frenchman and the Chinaman's purple mandarin robes. She included a vivid description of Arnolda Van Atta, hoping that such a weird menage of people must certainly have been seen by somebody during the last few hours. They would have no reason to discard their disguises because they must have been pretty sure they had wiped out April in the factory explosion. She had never seen Mr Riddle, of course, so she left him out of her message.

The man in Section Four barked a Roger at her and April clicked the set up, taking a deep breath.

There. At least, she had done that much.

The rest was up to efficiency and luck.

Luck always played a large part in any operation. It was the one intangible, imponderable aspect of every single moment of an agent's life.

With her report out of the way, she busied herself with the special equipment and protective devices of offense and defense that occupied the shelves of the Weapons Room. Mr Waverly was going to have a fit when she presented her expense account at the end of the month. She had lost an entire set of personal tools. Something she had rarely ever done. Mr Waverly had always commended her on her frugality and thrift, often chiding Slate, Solo and Kuryakin for their constant loss of equipment and very high lists of expenditures.

Still, that wasn't what was really bothering her.

Not even her New England background could make her forget for a moment that Mark was in the hands of the opposition.

If anything happened to that dear fool, she'd never forgive herself.

Suddenly she also realized with a start that she hadn't had a thing to eat all day. Not since breakfast. Her stomach was beginning to rebel.

She called the commissary, hoping to sneak in a sandwich and a cup of hot tea before the conference with Enforcement.

She also remembered to jot a memo down on a scrap pad. A reminder to herself to take care of the unwilling Samaritan of a cab driver.

Number seven-one-three-five-nine.

Around-the-Clock-Terror

The whipsaw wore a long green velvet dress. The *click-click* of the jade pendant he could not see had forced Mark Slate to open his weary eyes. The long, enforced strain of remaining perfectly still on the table that faced the .30 caliber Browning machine gun had taken its toll on his mind. He hadn't been able to afford the healing luxury of sleep or rest. He might wake up with a start and trip the wire that connected to the trigger of the gun. So he had remained in a state of rigid, controlled watchfulness. Because of it, he was utterly weary in mind and muscle.

Now, he could see Arnolda Van Atta's tigerish green hips. The velvet dress glittered as she brushed against his face. He did not miss the cruel riding crop, the hard, twisted, interlaced leather of the object. He smiled tightly.

"Ah, Miss Whipsaw," he murmured almost dreamily.

The green velvet dress paused, the riding crop stiffened. Arnolda Van Atta's subtle voice spoke coolly from somewhere above him.

"Whipsaw, Mr Slate? I don't understand—isn't that a saw in a frame of some kind?"

"Oh, very," he agreed mildly. "But it is also a person who somehow always gets the better of another person. I should say that description fit you very well, Miss Van Atta."

A low, silvery laugh came.

"It is good that you recognize superior intellect when you meet it."

"I didn't say *that,* old girl. The Nazis were whipsaws for the Jews and you know what happened to the Nazis."

The riding crop came down hard on the table, inches from Slate's face. It made a dull, heavy thudding sound.

"I'm glad you are what you are, Mr Slate," the redhead said in even, icy tones. "You are the perfect subject for torture. A strong will who will resist until every last shred of flesh is ripped from your body." He heard the riding crop slash experimentally through the atmosphere in the room. It made swishing, vicious noises. Slate hung onto his nerve.

"Pity, old girl."

"What's a pity?"

"That you can't find better uses for such a splendid physical specimen such as myself. I've made many women happy in my time, you know. Don't want to boast and all that but it is a waste of manpower. I imagine you look quite smashing in that fine green dress. Hair all up in a splendid coiffure, I suppose? Slim white throat, that imperial look of yours. Do you know the poem 'Richard Cory' by

Robinson? That line where it says '...and he glittered when he walked....' I fancy you must look like that right now. Why not be a sport and untie me from this infernal table so I can get a look at you?"

There was a long moment of silence in which she didn't answer him. Slate stiffened, waiting. Knowing that the next moment must bring one of two things. Either the first downward slash of the riding crop across his defenseless back. Or a withering scorn for the suggestion that a woman like Arnolda Van Atta was interested in anything so commonplace and vulgar as sex. Or both.

She surprised him.

She chuckled, in that low voice, the one that told him volumes regarding the amount of weird pleasure she was reaping from the entire situation.

"Really, Mr Slate. Do you think to delude me?"

"Fat chance of that, isn't there?"

"Yes, you are a superb physical specimen—" She cooed now. He shuddered as he felt her long cool fingers roll up the Basque shirt. She did that slowly, gingerly, knotting the tail of the shirt under his armpits. His midriff was bared now. He felt his mouth go dry. He could take a whipping all right. That part was all right. He wouldn't even mind the scars. It wasn't that. He remembered all too clearly a man whom he had known in London. The fellow had been an RAF flier in War Two, shot down over Germany and been interned in one of their bloody camps where some pig of a Nazi had whipped him like a dog. The fellow, Jenkins was his name, had smashed kidneys and a spinal column with several misplaced discs for life. That would not be pleasant. All from one ten-minute session with the lash in the hands of a brutal bastard who knew how to use it.

"Your skin is so smooth and soft," Arnolda Van Atta purred. "A man's back. Strong, well-muscled and admirable. It is too bad for you that sex holds no appeal for me. We could have spent this hour otherwise."

No appeal. That was a horselaugh. She was a pervert. A sadist. For whom cruelty and pain were pleasure. The Krafft-Ebing boys would have loved this redheaded bitch. Mark Slate could only fight for time.

"I see you've lost all interest in any usefulness I might have as an informant, is that it?"

She paused, her cool fingers freezing on his back.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I would speak up now to save my skin. You think me a bloody fool? Get me off this table and I'll tell you all you want to know."

"You fool," she laughed. "I'll learn what I must my way. You'll talk even more freely under the lash. I wouldn't for a moment consider

untieing you."

"I scream rather loudly," he pointed out.

"Go ahead. No one will hear you. This is a soundproofed room. Why do you think we brought you here in the first place?"

"You think of everything, don't you?"

"Of course."

"Then you'd better unhook that machine gun contraption of yours unless you want to redesign the walls of this room in bullet holes. I tend to jump high in the air when I am struck across the back with a whip."

Now, she truly laughed. A good-humored laugh. Her silvery tones rose and pealed like bells.

"My compliments," she trailed off, still chuckling. "You are quite a man, Mark Slate. Always the cool head even in the most extreme circumstances."

He closed his eyes and set his teeth together.

"Get on with it and be damned," he said. He opened his eyes again.

He heard the jade pendant again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the green velvet dress move. Twitching, as though she had to bend over. He was instantly on the alert, ready. He could sense her breathing close; she had had to bend down to unhook the long wire that ran like a lanyard to the trigger of the Browning gun. When he was sure she had disconnected the wire, saw it dangle to the floor loosely, like a discarded piece of string, so that now the Browning had been rendered a harmless ornament of the room's furnishings, he took his last desperate gamble.

He heaved violently on the table. As shackled as he was, ankles and wrists, his body dominated the entire top of the table. He weighed one hundred and seventy-five pounds and every one of those pounds was the finely conditioned, coordinated pound of an athlete. The table canted sharply, left the floor on one side and swung over. Mark rolled his body as far to the right as he could overbalancing the whole. Arnolda Van Atta cried out angrily. The riding crop sang in the air of the room. It bit into Slate's back, sending a long trail of fiery agony across his flesh. But the table crashed to the floor, taking Slate with it.

He was far more successful than he could have hoped. He had only wanted to buy time, to upset her schedule, to harry her into some other course of action. But miraculously, the narrow size of the room had come to his aid. The table, Mark Slate and all, came down on Arnolda Van Atta's left ankle as she tried to skip back. Her scream of bone-breaking torment rose like a banshee's shriek in the confining space of the room.

For a frenzied moment, the room was a madhouse.

Slate, pinned face down to the table, could not see a thing. He

could only feel his own weight, dragging against the bonds, pushing down on Arnolda Van Atta. Feebly, she was crying and flailing out at him with the riding crop, her curses and gurgles of pain sounding like those of a madwoman. The end of the leather crop fell short, missing him by inches. Finally, she gave up all together and sprawled out on the floor, her face buried in her arms, crying piteously. The table, laden with Slate's weight, had crushed her ankle.

The soundproof room was a mockery, now.

Arnolda Van Atta could not cry out for help.

And Mark Slate could do nothing for her.

Unless she cooperated.

"Pussycat," he said quickly, breathing hard. "There's nothing for it, unless you do your damndest to untie my hands. Then I can get this bloody table off your leg. You hear me! Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Your leg will only get worse if you don't do what I tell you—"

"The pain—" she moaned. "I can't—think straight—" A moan of agony was torn from her again.

"Think," he commanded. "Twist yourself around. Can't you reach my right hand? Just my right hand? That's all you need to do."

"I'll kill you for this," she gasped. "I'll have you—" She stopped talking as another fierce whimper escaped her. But he could feel her moving, wrenching herself, trying to curve her body around so she could reach the hand closest to her.

She was THRUSH, all right. But she was still a woman in agony.

Mark Slate waited, hoping she could make it before the others came around looking for her.

You always had a chance when the big shots gave in to one of their weird tendencies. Like a private torture chamber and all that Sax Rohmer nonsense.

"Come on, Miss Van Atta," he whispered. "Keep on coming."

The room echoed with the fierce order.

Mr Riddle and Fried Rice and Pig Alley were restless. The tinny clock on the wooden bureau beyond the table where their gin rummy game was in progress now said eight thirty-five.

Pig Alley was sweating visibly. Tiny globules of perspiration stood forth on his Gallic face. His dark eyes kept looking toward the door.

"*Sacre,*" he muttered under his breath.

"Patience," Fried Rice said, "and shuffle the cards. That is an estimable quote from Cervantes."

Pig Alley stuck out his tongue in disgust and glanced angrily at Mr Riddle. Frankenstein's leer was intact, as it always would be. But the thin, lanky figure was ill at ease. It was apparent in the tilt of the head toward the door and the drumming of the fingers of both hands on the

table top.

"Yes," Mr Riddle said. "It is a nuisance, gentlemen. But we must wait on the lady and her whims. She is directing this operation."

Pig Alley snorted. "And why you, dear Riddle? With that mask and all this Halloween business. I thought you were in charge—"

"So I am," he agreed coldly. "But I still answer to Miss Van Atta. If you knew her true identity, you wouldn't dare question her for a moment."

"And that is—"

Fried Rice looked up sharply at Mr Riddle as Pig Alley flung the question. But the Frankenstein head nodded.

"How long do you want to live, Pig Alley?"

"In other words, it is not my affair. Mind my own business."

"Exactly."

"Very well, but in God's name what more can she want to do to that poor Uncle agent?"

Mr Riddle sighed funereally.

"I agree with you on that. Zorki is far more important than this diversion. But there is time, she said. And what she says, I am afraid, is what we will do when the time comes."

Fried Rice flicked a voluminous sleeve and drew a card from the much-used deck. He turned up an ace of spades. He chuckled in his dry, thin voice.

"The Death Card," he said. "I should say Mr Slate is very close to death by this time."

Mr Riddle pushed back his chair and stood up. Hidden when he sat was the almost spectral quality of his body. It was as thin as a skeleton, sharply contrasting with the fullsome Frankenstein mask.

"Perhaps I should go see, anyway. Play without me. I should be back soon."

He left the room without waiting for comments from his subordinates. Fried Rice and Pig Alley merely exchanged glances and returned to the game.

Fried Rice was winning, handily.

The corridor was illuminated by three globes of light placed at even distances along the ceiling. As Mr Riddle had expected, Arnolda Van Atta had restricted this phase of the operation to the entire floor. There was no danger of running into strangers. Still, one couldn't be too careful. Once out of the room, he paused to tug the Frankenstein mask free of his face.

Had anyone been watching they would have been amazed to see atop the thin body in ill-fitting suit the face of a beautiful woman. The hair had been cut so close to the scalp as to be no more than a

peachlike fuzz of pelt. The face of the woman who had introduced herself as Mr Riddle belonged on a statue in a museum. Her mouth, eyes, nose, ears and chin were so regular and even as to constitute nearly chiseled perfection.

The bogus Mr Riddle started down the long corridor toward the room that held Mark Slate.

Suddenly, he-she paused, senses sharpened, faculties alerted. The tiniest click of sound had come from somewhere. The first indication that something was wrong was the sudden one-by-one extinction of the three lights overhead. It was magical. Like a winking eye. But long before the third bulb had died, Mr Riddle had reversed the field, and sped backward toward the fire door at the other end of the corridor.

Mr Riddle vanished through it in an instant, tugging the Frankenstein mask back into place.

The hotel's back staircase formed a central shaft in the very heart of the building.

April Dancer loomed in the darkness of the corridor. She held in her right hand a peculiarly box-shaped object from which no apparent light came. Yet, in actuality, it threw a ray of "black light" which lit up the hallway before her as well as daylight. She advanced down the corridor, the infrared rays of the box fluorescing the carpet before her. In her left hand, she held her specially designed service pistol. A compact weapon no larger than the palm of her hand.

The twin elevator cages whirred open. From each of them stepped a man. They too held the boxlike devices. They were also armed and on the ready. Walter Fleming and Pete Barnes now saw April Dancer and they all converged together in the center of the corridor.

There were only two doors on the floor.

One to the left of the elevators, one to the right

It had taken but a half hour to locate the blue-paneled truck. Parked outside in plain view on the sidewalk before one of the many apartment houses on the West Side in the mid-Fifties. April had lost no time commandeering a detail to hurry to the scene.

But not one of them, April or the two U.N.C.L.E. agents, had spied Mr Riddle quitting the scene.

April motioned toward one of the doors, silently. Fleming and Barnes, moving like a trained unit, fanned out and made their approach. April selected the other door for herself.

There had been no trick deciding that this had to be the trouble floor. Every other floor in the building was deserted. The apartment house was one of those that was going down in the summer, to make way for a new, larger, co-op apartment building.

Another THRUSH blind.

April moved to the strange door and set the box-lamp down on the

floor. She transferred her weapon to her right hand and placed her ear to the panel. No sound came from within.

She took the knob in her left hand and kicked the door in, gun held high. Light flooded from the room, filling the corridor. In the split second that the insane tableau presented itself to her, Mark Slate's cheery voice piped up from somewhere near the floor.

"April Dancer, upon my soul. What kept you?"

Mr Waverly Calls the Tune

Fried Rice and Pig Alley went for their weapons as soon as Walter Fleming and Pete Barnes crashed into their room. For a moment, the light caught the flashing reflection of a long stiletto jumping into Pig Alley's right hand. Fried Rice produced a wicked looking .38 caliber pistol from one sleeve of the purple mandarin robes.

Fleming and Barnes hardly paused for a moment. From either side of the doorway, they opened up. The odd-appearing weapons in their hands made coughing noises of sound. *Splat! Splat! Splat!*

Fried Rice and Pig Alley were halted. Their eyeballs rolled, their hands stopped moving. The stiletto and the pistol clattered to the floor of the room. Both of Mr Riddle's subordinates sprawled forward in their chairs, faces falling down to the card table.

The U.N.C.L.E. agents holstered their weapons and quickly checked the room closets and doors for hidden threats. There were none. They hardly spoke or favored the unconscious men with a second glance. For that was all that Fried Rice and Pig Alley were. Unconscious; rendered so by the special "mercy" bullets in the U.N.C.L.E. guns. Harmless pellets of a drug which acted instantly upon contact with the skin. Murder was never committed if it could be avoided. And the two THRUSH underlings were more valuable delivered alive than dead. These would be, at any rate.

They hurried down the corridor to the other room to see if April Dancer needed a hand.

She had untied Mark Slate, righted the table, and was covering Arnolda Van Atta with her palm gun. The injured redhead was alternately moaning in agony and hurling murderous glances at Mark Slate. The velvet dress had run up, exposing half her thighs.

Slate, that cool-headed character, was flexing and working his arms and legs to get the kinks out. Fleming and Barnes restrained grins and comments. Slate was a dandy when it came to clothes as it was and now the blue jeans and Basque shirt made him look more like a male model than ever.

"Nice going, chappies," Slate smiled. "You and April arrived like the U.S. Cavalry in a John Wayne movie."

April shook her head. "We'd better get the lady to a doctor. That ankle is swelling like a balloon." She eyed Fleming and Barnes. "Any luck in the other room?"

"One Chinaman and one Frenchman," Barnes said.

"That would be the Messrs. Fried Rice and Pig Alley," Slate said. "You didn't find a Mr Riddle by any chance?"

"Negative," Fleming said.

Arnolda Van Atta, her classic features contorted with agony, shrilled: "Get me a doctor, for God's sakes—"

"Shut up," April said coldly. "We ought to get you a firing squad. But let's move out, boys. No sense hanging around here." She checked her watch. "Nine thirty eight. The Old Man ought to be home by now."

"Check," Slate said.

Walter Fleming and Pete Barnes, without being asked, fashioned a sling of their arms, and hoisted Arnolda Van Atta's shapely figure between them. April undid the brooch that pinned the collar of her dress. A *beeping* sound filled the room.

"Dancer here," she spoke into the brooch. A crisp voice answered and she quickly reported the news. Mark hurried down the hall to see about taking charge of Fried Rice and Pig Alley. They would have to be transferred to Headquarters. It was a big catch for one day's work. And U.N.C.L.E. still had Zorki. The Great Zorki—even if the mysterious Mr Riddle had flown the coop.

When they had the whole menagerie rounded up, April closed out her report and repinned the brooch to her throat collar. Her brown eyes and long dark hair were, as usual, eminently out of place, in the wake of the murderous hullabaloo.

In the crowded elevator, Slate smiled at her warmly, shaking his handsome head.

"Thanks for the nick-of-time routine, April."

"Sure, sure."

"She was ready to skin me alive." He indicated the glowering Arnolda Van Atta, suspended painfully between Fleming and Barnes.

"Losing your touch, Mark?" April laughed. "I should have thought she would have wanted to neck with you."

He winced in memory of the whip and how close he had come to matching Jenkins, the man in London.

" 'Fraid not. You see our lady here is a confirmed sadist. Worth knowing, April, should you ever desire to show her one jot of human kindness. A snake, this one."

"I'll keep it in mind."

She eyed Mark Slate affectionately, ignoring the venomous glares of the redhead. "Besides, I can't lose sight of you just yet, you refugee from an English fox hunt."

He raised his eyebrows superciliously. "Why not, pray tell?"

"You still haven't taught me the complete lyrics of 'I Want To Hold Your Hand.' "

Walter Fleming and Pete Barnes tried not to laugh but their sober faces relaxed in quiet smiles. Mark Slate said nothing.

April Dancer stared at the handcuffed pair known as Fried Rice and Pig Alley. It was too bad they had missed Mr Riddle. But Slate

was alive and that was all that mattered.

And Mr Waverly was coming back; he could take over the whole operation again.

The Zorki Affair was coming to a head and it was high time things were finally resolved.

Still, she couldn't get out of her mind the plaintive young girl called Joanna Paula Jones and the whole business of U.S. Naval Intelligence being involved. Had the girl gotten out of that flood and fire alive?

April Dancer had her own ideas about a woman's role in life and there was nothing for herself but U.N.C.L.E. She didn't want anything else; she didn't care about anything else.

But she would have placed Joanna Paula Jones at the kitchen stove, cooking meals for a man and taking care of a houseful of kids. It just didn't add up. Not in the least.

There was something so damned strange, peculiar really, about that young lady. What was it; what could it be that was kicking around in her head dying for an answer?

She didn't know.

She still didn't know as they all piled into the two sedans that would take them back to Headquarters. Barnes drove the blue panel truck.

New York shone in the night. Neon gleamed. Cars squealed and roared. A horn tootled. Somewhere, a church bell ding-donged the hour.

Ten o'clock.

Two hours to midnight.

Midnight, when THRUSH wanted Zorki. But they had no bargaining power now. Mark Slate was out of their hands. So was she. What would THRUSH ask for now? April had a hunch that Mr Waverly knew. Else why the sudden trip to Washington, D.C.?

Well, they'd know soon enough.

"You know," Mark Slate said suddenly, his wry voice alive with his own devilish sense of humor. "There's a jolly good movie playing Radio City. It's about spies and foreign intrigue and all. Stars Sophia Loren. Imagine that Italian *pizza* playing a spy. Quite ridiculous on the face of it. But what say we drop everything and go see it?"

"Sure," April said, "and why don't I run for Congress or grow wings and fly over London and drop leaflets inviting everybody to the wedding of George Hamilton and Luci Baines Johnson, or is it Lynda Bird he's marrying?"

"Lynda Bird," said Mark Slate and lapsed into silence again.

The round, magnificent table-desk in Mr Waverly office was one of

those ornate yet supremely technological masterpieces that defies description. The table revolved at a finger's touch and whoever was sitting at a place there could command the use of a telephone, radio set, transmitter or a host of filing treats that made an agent's work much easier.

Mark Slate, in jocular moods, would spin the table like a roulette wheel and call out numbers. But only when he and April were awaiting Mr Waverly's presence.

On this particular occasion, the head of U.N.C.L.E. was waiting for them when they entered the office. After brief greetings, Mr Waverly asked them for detailed reports of the day's activities.

Slate began the narration, leaving off where April had entered the picture. From that point on, she added all that she knew and had accomplished. She spoke lightly in an even, melodious voice, whose tonal quality Mr Waverly had always found soothing. And rather astounding too. When one looked at Miss Dancer, for all her vital good looks and obvious intelligence, one hardly expected a combination of Mata Hari and a female Tarzan. Mr Waverly had always thoroughly approved of April Dancer. She was a credit to her U.N.C.L.E. Academy training. A living refutation of the claim that women could not be made to serve in the capacity of Enforcement agents.

"Good work, Miss Dancer," he murmured, when she had concluded. "You too, Mr Slate. Glad to have you both back in one piece, as it were." He steepled his fingers, regarding them in his headmaster way. "This certainly has the thoroughness of a Thrush project. I'd rather hoped that I was in error about our Mr. Zorki."

April moved around in her chair. The bruised leg and shoulder were still bothering her, having stiffened somewhat. But her mind was on something else.

"How do you mean, Mr Waverly?"

"You recall Zorki's miraculous escape from death the day he was exposed to the radium bullets? And his subsequent boast about a drug that guaranteed life everlasting?"

"But that's—fiddlesticks," April blurted. "He's an egomaniac. A fluke saved him. Possibly the machine wasn't working at full power. As for his boast, well, he only thinks he's the greatest living scientist in the world, doesn't he?"

Mark Slate prodded his weary eyes with his hands. "I go along with April on that, sir. It's all beer and skittles."

"Is it?" Waverly smiled fondly at them both. "I wish I could say that I shared your certainty. I'm afraid I cannot. What explanation is there then for the efforts of Thrush to regain his services? For abducting you, Mr Slate? And you, Miss Dancer? Look how extensive their plain out-and-out efforts were. The business with this blue truck of theirs.

The circus aspects of the thing. Your captors. This mysterious Mr Riddle and the Van Atta woman. No, I am quite convinced in my mind. Which is why I chose to fly to the capitol and discuss the matter with some VIP's. We shall have to treat Mr. Zorki as if he indeed is the discoverer of the most shocking panacea of them all. There is no other alternative."

April shrugged. "We have the man. Isn't that enough?"

"It is, certainly. But I'm sure we haven't seen the last of Thrush in the matter. They are still in the wings, ready to come on. I'm sure of it."

"He could be brainwashed," April suggested.

"Perhaps. But not just yet. I have planned a diversion. You see, Dr. Egret is in this somewhere. The communique I received re your capture, Mr Slate, was signed with that name."

"Egret?" April murmured the name; she and Slate exchanged impressed glances.

"Yes, Egret. The diabolical, the unknown. The woman of a thousand faces and disguises." Mr Waverly unsteepled his fingers and leaned forward across the polished table. "What of this Van Atta woman, Miss Dancer?"

"She checks out, sir. All the way down the line. Born in New York, raised here. Career woman from the word go. No romantic affiliations. She does work at the UN as a translator. Her sole means of support, barring any funds she receives from Thrush. No, she's not Egret. She couldn't be. Just a gorgeous magpie who flew with the bright, new movement. An intellectual radical. And a bit of a case for the analysts. Ask Slate."

Slate nodded. "They must have contacted her for this assignment. She was figurative head of this League of Nations gang. The man called Mr Riddle seemed to be the top man but I'd stake my last penny that our redhead was the one calling the plays."

"Neither of you saw this person at any time?"

"Just a voice to me," April recalled. "A flat emotionless voice. Like someone reading a grocery list. Really a hard voice to pin down to a definite category."

Mark Slate coughed. "I saw half of him when they crowded around that serving board they had me laid out on. The voice sounded muffled then, half-clear, as though the man was wearing a mask of sorts."

"Man," Mr Waverly repeated. "Then you would both rule out the possibility that it could be a woman disguising her natural speaking voice?"

"I wouldn't commit myself," April answered, trying to hear once again that flat voice coming into their cell room. "If it was a woman

talking like a man, then Dr. Egret must be a marvelous mimic."

"She is, Miss Dancer. She once posed as an eighty-year-old Nobel prizewinner and fooled the police of three countries for five months. Mr Slate?"

Mark shook his head. It was impossible to say for sure.

Waverly pursed his lips.

"Let's recap, shall we? Might clear the air a bit. Alek Yakov Zorki comes here to do a bit of damage, indulging in his old fondness for bombings. We apprehend him. Thrush knows almost immediately that we have. A troubling thought about our Headquarters Security system, incidentally. Now, Thrush captures Mr Slate through the ingenuity of this Van Atta woman. She is equipped with an entourage of international help—the Chinese, the Frenchman and the poor Hindu you mentioned, Miss Dancer. His corpse, as well as the truckdriver's is probably in the rubble back there at that burned-out factory in the Bronx. We'll know better in the morning. The note from Egret suggests a swap of agents at midnight in Grand Central Station, or at the very least a continuance of negotiations. We have put a stop to that by having you both back safe and sound. The next move is Egret's. Will she or won't she get in touch with me? All fairly simple now, save for two odd factors." The head of U.N.C.L.E. fixed his stern but parental gaze on April and Mark Slate. "Who and what is Mr Riddle and where did he get off to? And that dear little girl you found in the lockers—Joanna Paula Jones?—odd name that—where does she fit into the picture? We are contacting Naval Intelligence now to see if such a person was assigned to this matter. When I was in Washington, the Navy Chief did mention some interest in Zorki. But we shall have to wait. As I see it, that about represents all we have so far. Have I left anything out?"

"Yes," April interjected. "You mentioned some diversion you had planned in regard to Zorki—"

"Ah, yes." Mr Waverly smiled. "You will turn your attention to the far wall." He glanced at his watch. "It's a bit late but in any case, you will be able to judge for yourself the efficacy of our experiment."

April and Slate wheeled around in their chairs to face the elevated row of closed television circuit screens aligned on the far wall. Mr Waverly pressed a button in the recess of the table where he sat.

One of the screens lit up, instantly. A bright, clear picture, unmuddled, without snow. As clear as a glass of water. They could see a man, dressed in a gray turtleneck sweater and trousers; the massive body and bull head were familiar.

"The Great Zorki," April murmured. "Caged Russian bear."

"And now this," Waverly said and pressed another button. The screen adjacent to the picture lit up. It was uncanny. The same man,

only this time the mood was different. The bull head was propped on a pillow, the bushy eyebrows were knit in concentration, the face staring at the floor of the cell. This Zorki was deep in reflection. The garments were identical. Gray turtleneck sweater, whipcord trousers. Mr Waverly chuckled drily as both men came to life on the screen.

"Now, I've a question for you both. Which one of the men that you see is indeed our Russian friend?"

"It's an amazing duplication," Slate marveled. "But I'd place my pennies on the joker that's stalking like a bear."

"And you, Miss Dancer. Take your pick."

"I'm not being contrary," April laughed, "but I'd have to say the one staring at the floor. I don't base that opinion on any flaw in the disguise, though."

"Oh." Mr Waverly sounded amused. "Why do you select the reflective Zorki as the real one?"

"He's wearing a wristwatch. And we don't allow our prisoners anything like that."

"Tallyho," Mark Slate laughed. "You're right."

"And so she is," Waverly agreed, clicking the buttons on his desk again. The screens went dark. "I shall have to remind Mr. Wilder about that. Though it does no harm at the moment."

"Wilder?" April echoed. "That was James Wilder? Yes, yes—I see now. He's built like Zorki, the face and hair is close enough and with makeup—"

"Quite. You really wouldn't be able to tell them apart if they stood in the center of this room."

"But," Slate interrupted. "There's no need now for this game of Zorki, is there, sir? You've no place to go with him."

"You forget, Mr Slate," Waverly's expression was grim. "We have yet to hear from Egret again. And don't worry. We will hear from her. I'm sure of it."

"It's close to eleven o'clock," April said blandly, reaching for a cigarette. "Do we get any beauty sleep tonight?"

Mr Waverly's teeth showed for one of the few times in their long acquaintance with him.

"I would be the first to suggest you do not need sleep to augment your beauty, Miss Dancer. Getting back to reality, however, I would prefer you both remain at Headquarters tonight. I expect to be hearing from the teletypes and I shall want you on hand."

"Roger, sir." Mark Slate rose to his feet, still incongruous in Basque shirt and blue jeans. "The bunks aren't bad in this hotel."

"Do change to more suitable raiment, Mr Slate."

"Yes, sir," he said soberly.

April got up too and straightened her skirt. She replaced the unlit

cigarette in her pack. Waverly regarded her keenly.

"A suggestion, Miss Dancer." April looked at him.

"Since Miss Van Atta is a woman and her ankle has been seen to in the interim, I think she will be in the mood to talk. At any rate, I should like you to try before you settle down for the night. Can't tell. A declawed tigress sometimes is apt to growl a different tune. She just might be ready to trade information as a price for her crimes."

"The idea was on the tip of my tongue," April smiled.

"Of course it was," Mr Waverly agreed and dismissed them both with a wave of his hand. When they had closed the door behind them, they could hear him on the transmitter, asking for a call to be relayed to Napoleon Solo in Rangoon. It was still daylight in Rangoon.

Arnolda Van Atta's cell was one in a row of cubicles in the underground maze that housed the facilities of U.N.C.L.E. Mark Slate had taken a turn to the left, down a corridor running north toward the sleeping quarters, but April walked quickly toward Arnolda Van Atta's pen. It was late, very late, and she wasn't in much of a mood to talk to the redheaded woman, but Mr Waverly's idea was sound. A badly broken ankle and a plot gone awry could work wonders with a woman like Arnolda.

Take away the comforts, the luxuries and the command, and sometimes these cold, calculating types did a faster fold-up than their less complex counterparts.

It worked that way sometimes.

The peculiar gray light that dominated the corridors and halls of U.N.C.L.E, Headquarters cast a steady glow over the interior of the building. April passed through many steel doors and electric-eye protective devices that would have set off a whole battery of alarm systems were it not for the chemically treated badge card pinned to her dress. It was an easy building to get lost in. A far easier building for the wrong person to get in trouble in. Just no place for anyone who had no business there.

She found the cell. It was set in the middle of a long passageway, where a host of other cells loomed emptily. Fried Rice and Pig Alley, being male, would be in another section of the building.

Arnolda Van Atta was lying on her bunk, face turned toward the gray wall. The gleam of white bandages and plaster of paris cast on her damaged leg stood out almost like an electric light in the dim shadows of the cubicle. April reached the grilled bars and looked in. The woman couldn't be sleeping. Not now. Not with the pain of that ankle. Even if they had given her sedatives—

Once again, woman though she was, April could appreciate and even envy the long, shapely, statuesque figure of Arnolda Van Atta.

The splendid hips and slender legs and flaming red hair were stunning physical assets in a female.

April placed her hands on the bars.

"Miss Van Atta," she said cheerily. "I know you're not sleeping. I want to talk to you."

The redhead did not stir.

"Now, look, Miss Van Atta. There's no use—"

She stopped, unable to fully absorb the reality of the incredible truth.

Arnolda Van Atta was not sleeping. Nor would she be able to talk to April Dancer or anyone else in this lifetime. Whatever conversation they could have had would have to be resumed in that mysterious place where all spies must go when they die. The good ones and the bad ones. *There but for you, spy I.*

For even standing where she was, April could now see the bone handle of the knife jutting from between the redhead's shoulder blades. It had gone all the way in, up to the hilt, plunged inward with great force and power. The velvet green dress now bore a wide area of reddish brown where the hilt poked outwards.

But for April, the chilling thought was not that of death. That was something, of course, but not really the shocker. Agents have to get used to the idea of death. Sudden or otherwise. It was a twenty-four hour, around-the-clock possibility and it was always there.

No, that wasn't it at all.

The real killer was that somewhere, right here in U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters, no-man's-land for the enemy, there walked a *traitor.* A live, moving, thinking, deadly adversary whom no one suspected.

I Have Not Yet Begun to Spy

Mr Waverly was not happy to know that an assassin was loose in Headquarters. Once April had sounded the alarm, setting in motion Maximum Security Regulations all over the complex, Waverly had hurried to the cell block, accompanied by a team of Lab technicians and experts.

There was nothing that could be done for Arnolda Van Atta. Death had been instantaneous.

The assassin had struck her as she lay on her cot, face to the wall apparently. She had been dead barely an hour. Mr Waverly was extremely worried.

Someone had had the key to open Miss Van Atta's cell door. Someone knew the location of all the alarm systems. Someone was wearing an U.N.C.L.E. badge card who should not be wearing that card. Someone, perhaps one of these very men who were with him, examining Miss Van Atta's corpse, was a THRUSH agent. The idea was chilling.

"No fingerprints on the handle, Mr Waverly," one of the technicians said brusquely.

"I thought not."

"Chances are good she didn't even see her murderer. She must have been lying there, when he opened the cell door and tiptoed in."

"Yes, I suppose so. Still, he must have been known to her. If he is one of Thrush's agents."

"Floor's empty too," another U.N.C.L.E. man said. He was holding a curious black box whose filtered bottom threw a luminous light that would have shown any form of disturbance on the stone floor. Not so much as a molecule of dust had been disturbed.

"Yes," Waverly murmured. "One who knows all our tricks. Only one of our own kind could have foreseen our using this sort of equipment to detect clues. Still, he has to be someone working against time and there is very little left."

The U.N.C.L.E. agents had nothing to say to that.

The furrows in Mr Waverly's face deepened as he left the experts to finish their messy work. He asked April to accompany him back to his office.

"Coming, Miss Dancer?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where is Mr Slate?"

"'Still pounding his ear. Shall I buzz him?"

"Not just yet. We may need him at the top of his form very shortly."

In the office, Mr Waverly indicated a yellow streamer of teletype lying on the marvelous, circular table. "Read that if you will, Miss Dancer."

April scooped up the streamer. The typed words were short, to the point and not very sweet:

THRUSH FLIES HIGH. FORGET GRAND
CENTRAL. RELEASE ZORKI AT ONCE OR THE
BUILDING WILL BLOW SKY-HIGH BEFORE
TOMORROW MORNING. THIS IS A LAST WARNING.
—EGRET

"Do you think it's a bluff, Mr Waverly?"

For once, the old man spread his hands helplessly. His brown eyes were bleak.

"A bluff? What more proof do we need? This woman murdered in our very midst." He eyed April sourly. "Dancer, I hadn't wished to mention this before but this makes it imperative." April felt a cold wave travel down her spine. When Mr Waverly called her Dancer, she knew how serious things were. In times of great stress, the old man was apt to cut corners and forget the niceties of talking to a woman, even if he was her superior. "There's been a security leak at Headquarters for quite some time. A good deal of our messages have been intercepted across the Atlantic. Papers and files have disappeared at times. Nothing really serious until this. Now I can no longer chalk it up to faulty wireless or careless clerks or a breakdown in our technological equipment. I should have known it would assume these proportions. Thrush has been able to plant these messages in Del Floria's—the first one was dropped there—and now this comes to me over our own private teletype system. It's baffling. I want Zorki, we *must* keep him, but if Headquarters is in danger—" He paused, as if hoping that the mere act of talking would bring the solution. April restrained a strong urge to reach her hand out to comfort him, but she couldn't do that. Must never do it. "Look how they were able to single out Mark Slate for apprehension. No, there is someone here at Headquarters responsible for the whole affair."

"If there is a bomb, Mr Waverly, we can find it. The message doesn't give us a deadline on time."

"That is precisely what troubles me the most. It's so cocksure, so dead certain. Oh, we can screen everyone in the building now. I can have our Lab men and demolitions experts cover the maze from top to bottom. But that will take hours. Hours we may not have to spare. So I must use the ace in the hole that I have saved for this moment. I will set Wilder loose. Let them see that Zorki is walking away from this

building, a free man."

April shuddered. "But where's our guarantee? Who will disarm the bomb—if there is a bomb? If they get Zorki, won't they just go ahead and put us out of business?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps. But what else do you suggest?"

"I guess I'm just thinking out loud, sir. All we can do is what you say and hunt high and low for our traitor and his—bomb."

Mr Waverly nodded, as if that were all he wanted to hear. He moved to his chair, arranging the battery of panels and communication buttons before him. His scholar's face was pensive. April was keenly appreciative of the enormous load of responsibility resting on her superior's shoulders. The midnight shift of personnel would be arriving shortly and a normal complement of U.N.C.L.E. people could total as many as fifty. Then there was the amazing million-dollar complex itself—the tons of equipment, devices, weapons and warehouses of filing data that had taken years and the blood of dozens of good agents to accumulate. The history of U.N.C.L.E., its many successes and its few failures, had always had that costly price placed on it. All agents faced death.

"Give Mr Slate another half hour's rest, Dancer. Then call him. I'll busy myself with the details of our manhunt."

"Right, Mr Waverly."

"Meanwhile I suggest—"

He paused as a beeping sound filled the office. A blue light glowed on the panel before him. Mr Waverly depressed a buzzer, his face suddenly alert.

"Yes?"

A crisp man's voice filled the room.

"*Prisoner, Mr Waverly. Loitering in the doorway of Del Floria's. She tried to pick the lock and set off the alarm. We have her now in the Restraint Room.*"

"Hmm. The shop was closed, of course. Anything else?"

"*Young, very attractive, butch haircut. Pug nose. Says her name is Joanna Paula Jones and she's from U.S. Naval Intelligence.*"

April was out of her chair in a flash. Excitement and pleasure flooded her. Mr Waverly spoke quietly into the transmitter, looking steadily at his agent.

"Send Miss Jones up."

"*Yes, sir.*"

"That's her," April crowed. "Not bad for a youngster. Finding us like this. Getting out of that building alive. She must know something—"

"Let us hope so," Mr Waverly said calmly and quietly. "We are in the need of knowledge. And miracles, I might add."

At second sight, Joanna Paula Jones seemed even younger and more adolescent than ever. Her boyishly bobbed hair, creamy white skin and tilted nose belonged on a pixie, not an agent of the armed services. Somewhere, she too had found time and wherewithal to change her attire and repair the damage of the wettest escape since the Deluge. When she saw April, her face lit up.

"Hi, there. Am I glad to see you!" She paused in embarrassment, hesitant before the solemnity of Mr Waverly's presence. He bowed slightly, waving her to a chair.

"Ditto," April said. "But first tell me how you got out of that fix we were in. I floated downriver until I snagged the shoreline in Bronx Park."

"Miss Jones," Mr Waverly said. "Feel free to answer Miss Dancer, I shall ask you some questions directly."

"That's very nice of you, Mr.—"

"Waverly."

"—Waverly." Joanna Paula Jones sighed, shrugging her shoulders. "I don't know. Miracle, I guess. I was washed away too. But I woke up a long way off from that building, I can tell you. Since then I've been busier than a beaver."

"I can imagine," April said. "Go on."

"I contacted my people and they told me to find you people. That was a chore. Took me all night. But I managed. You see, Naval Intelligence wants us to pool our efforts, in a sort of unofficial way, of course, depending on how things work out with Mr. Zorki." She turned to Mr Waverly, eagerly. "You still have him as prisoner?"

Waverly nodded, not wanting to interrupt the girlish flow of her story. April hid a smile, for Joanna made her think back to her own first days as an U.N.C.L.E. agent. Possibly she had come on just as feminine and gushy as Joanna Paula Jones did now. A girl learned only with time.

"That's fine. He belongs locked up. A terrible man. Well, here I am and I want to help. I thought letting you people catch me was the simplest way. It worked too, didn't it?"

"It certainly did," April laughed. "How did you know about Del Floria's?"

Joanna Paula Jones looked surprised. "Oh, I've known that a long time. Doesn't everyone?"

Mr Waverly now interrupted. Almost coldly.

"Everyone does not. Answer the question, please."

"When they caught me—that bunch of fanatics—and put me in that locker. Well, they asked me a lot of questions and I overheard them discussing U.N.C.L.E. All about the place. The tailor shop entrance. All of it."

"Who spoke of it, Miss Jones? Try to remember."

"It was the woman." Joanna Paula Jones screwed up her piquant face thoughtfully. "Yes, that redhead. All about how they had a man planted here. Someone who had a fine U.N.C.L.E. record and would never be suspected. I thought you'd want to know that."

April leaned forward. "Please, Joanna. Think hard. Was the man's name ever mentioned?" Waverly tensed.

"No—I don't—wait a minute. You see, I got on to them because I met a man from U.N.C.L.E. a month ago. Just about the time Zorki was captured. He sort of let me in on things. Well, it was he who suggested I follow that blue truck. You know the League of Nations thing. It was a great tip. Only thing was I got caught. Almost got killed too. I would have if it hadn't been for you, Miss Dancer."

Mr Waverly and April Dancer couldn't believe their ears. The glances they exchanged could have been emblazoned in Macy's front window for all the world to see. Was it possible that this incredibly naive young woman held the key to all their difficulties? Held the key and was unaware of it?

"Oh—" Joanna Paula Jones clapped a hand to her mouth. Her eyes popped. "How stupid I've been! You both mean that the man who talked to me is the man who's responsible for all this trouble with Mr. Zorki?"

Mr. Alexander Waverly leaned across the round table. His brown eyes targeted in on Joanna Paula Jones. There was electricity in every line of his lean body.

"Miss Jones," he said slowly, kindly, very very carefully. "Who was that man from U.N.C.L.E.?"

"Wilder," she said promptly, smiling to cover her error in logic. "James Wilder. He was ever so cooperative."

She repressed a shriek of dismay at the amount of activity her innocuous statement triggered. Mr Waverly sprang back to his panel board, thumbing buzzers. April shot over to the place where her own chair was and unhooked the intercom that loomed up like a cobra head before her. She started rattling instructions into the mouthpiece, urgently calling Mark Slate's name. No static came or sounded.

Mr Waverly thumbed on the buttons that governed the televisor screens lining the wall. Nothing happened. They remained dark and inactive. The head of U.N.C.L.E. abandoned the set, his craggy features set in hard lines. He marched rapidly toward the office door.

"Come along, Miss Dancer. You too, Miss Jones. It is no less than I expect. I only hope we aren't too late."

April nodded, following him, jerking Joanna Paula Jones out of her chair. The traitor had already made his next move. Not one of the systems in the office was functioning properly. Whatever he had

decided to do was already underway. Operation Free Zorki was on the march.

All systems for that one were *Go, Go, Go*!

Far over the East River, fairly invisible in the dark of night, a giant helicopter chopped briskly through the skies. The riding lights were minimal, tiny stars lost in a vast arena of heaven. The full-throated roar of the motor and the mammoth circular rotation of the powerful rotary propellors were almost lost in the multiplicity of noises filling the New York night. Tugs and seagoing freighters mooed like enormous cows in the harbor. Jets zoomed across the skies. The clamor and violence of a great city still awake, still alive, still operating.

The helicopter, traveling at six thousand feet, banked sharply where the 59th Street Bridge below lay like a child's discarded toy against the silver-spotted expanse of the river. It kept on banking, spiraling downward until the altitude loss was phenomenal. Some four hundred feet above the river line, the whirlybird ploughed south, tracing the course of the water.

Within seconds, the machine had reached 42nd Street. It banked once more, circling. Far down below somewhere, from the mass of darkened rooftops, a light blinked. Once, twice, three times. The light followed that pattern for a full minute. The helicopter seemed to stand still in mid-air hovering like an enormous flying bug.

Now, the streams of lights from vehicles racing back and forth, in both directions, along the East River Drive, were ribbons of continuous illumination in the night.

But the steady winking light blinked intermittently. Once, twice, three times. On and off. Off and on.

The helicopter moved again.

Dropping almost vertically. Hundreds of feet fell away until the last hundred between ground and sky was left. The chopper pulled up sharply, hovering again. From the street it would have been impossible to detect. The humming and throbbing of the engines and rotary blades was an enormous drone of sound that could have been attributed to the subways or the noises of a trip-hammer.

Directly below, the winking light went off for the last time. It did not go on again.

The helicopter waited, hovering. A midnight figment of a dreamer's imagination.

Down below, in the packed mass of darkness, among the huddled rooftops, directly under the chopper, stood the building that housed the organization known as U.N.C.L.E.

Headquarters.

The Two Mad Bombers

U.N.C.L.E. Enforcement Agent Walter Fleming was on duty on the third floor of the complex. The corridor was a long, gray steel file, bisected with sliding doors that bridged the gap between the walls. Fleming was busy checking his weapon for possible malfunctions. This was the machine pistol which had sent a "mercy" bullet into Fried Rice at the apartment building. The thing had been acting up lately and Fleming planned to turn it over to the armorer the very next day. It was close to midnight and Walter Fleming stifled a yawn. He would be relieved soon and it was time enough. Sometimes, in spite of the excitement earlier that night, things did get a bit quiet around Headquarters. Why even now, the whole damn building was as silent as a tomb—

Walter Fleming frowned.

That wasn't right. He suddenly realized that he had not heard an elevator hum or so much as a signal beep that he could remember these past few minutes. That shouldn't be. Not with the midnight shift arriving and setting up, taking over for the personnel they would be relieving. There was always some sort of sound. Fleming climbed out of his chair at the corridor's very end, where it forked in both directions toward the elevators and scanned the foyer briefly. For a moment, he was on his guard, all of his senses alert. Then he heard the elevator and the sound of footsteps walking casually, unconcernedly somewhere behind him. He turned.

Down the corridor, stepping through sliding doors just hissing shut, came a big, bear-shouldered man in gray turtleneck sweater and taut trousers. Walter Fleming started. Zorki! But no, it had to be James Wilder in the special trick makeup and costume that Mr Waverly had prescribed for the assignment. Fleming knew about that. He did relax when he saw the U.N.C.L.E. odd-shaped badge card pinned to the breast of the sweater.

Still—

Walter Fleming trained the machine pistol on the bull-necked man marching toward him. This Zorki waved, smiling, showing small white teeth.

"Wouldn't shoot a pal, would you, Walter?"

Fleming chuckled, shaking his head. "Damme, Jimmy, but that's some disguise. Never realized you looked so much like Zorki. Even with the extra touches. Sure he isn't your brother?"

"My Big Brother," gloated James Wilder, for it was indeed he and not Alek Yakov Zorki. However, it did not make much difference, which was something Walter Fleming did not know.

"What's up, Jimmy?"

"Have to see Mr Waverly. The Russky wants to talk to him about something. I don't know but what it might be important."

"Never hurts to try," Fleming assented.

As the dual Zorki brushed by him, Walter Fleming felt a sharp sting on the bare skin of his right hand. He emitted a sudden bleat of surprise and stepped back. When he saw the puncture mark on the hairy surface of his hand, he looked up quickly. When he saw the look in James Wilder's eyes, he tried to bring up his machine pistol. The bogus Zorki didn't make a move. It was not necessary.

Walter Fleming's eyeballs rolled and he collapsed in half, sliding to the smooth floor. He was dead before he could watch his murderer return by the way he had come to the sliding panels that bisected the corridor.

The panels hissed apart.

Alek Yakov Zorki barreled through, his big figure animated and agitated. Pinned to his facsimile sweater was another of the odd-shaped badge cards. His small eyes gleamed at the sight of the fallen agent.

James Wilder motioned to him, as he reset the hypodermic needle in the stem of his watch. THRUSH poisons worked with the speed of light.

"Come on," James Wilder whispered. "We've got just five minutes to make the roof. And that's all the time that those systems will stay out of order. I had to work fast."

"*Da*," Alek Yakov Zorki rumbled, sweat standing out on his bull face. "Kolya, it cannot be soon enough for me."

"Let's save the reunion for later."

"As you say."

They whipped around the fork in the corridor and headed for the stairway, James Wilder leading the way. Zorki lunged behind him. Two large men in a great hurry.

They were reflections of each other. Veritable twins. Two peas in a pod.

Only their mother could have told them apart.

And she had always had quite a time of it, in the very beginning, when they were two little boys growing up in Tatarstan, Russia.

Alek and Nicolai Zorki.

Alek had always called Nicolai "*Kolya*."

April Dancer, Mr Waverly, Mark Slate and Joanna Paula Jones didn't need a diagram. The two cells that had held Alek Yakov Zorki and his impersonator, James Wilder, separated by some five feet of concrete bunker, were empty.

Slate, hastily summoned by a vocal chain of commands to the other agents scampering all over the complex and trying to locate the source of the malfunctioning systems, was properly attired now. His loud weskit, flaming red beneath a blue blazer, set him off like a playboy at a funeral parlor.

"Our birds have flown," Mr Waverly said. "The question is where?"

"They can't get out of Headquarters without being seen," Slate said. "That's one sure thing."

"Not at all, Mr Slate," Waverly demurred. "If we have a traitor in our midst, there is no guaranteeing anything, is there? He certainly is familiar with all our security measures and must have prepared himself in advance."

April bit her lip, breaking her long-standing resolution not to do so in company.

"It doesn't make sense, does it? Unless—"

She halted. Thinking out loud was a bad habit, too. Especially with Mr Waverly in charge.

Slate frowned at her. "You were about to say?"

"It's probably a wild guess, Mark."

"The wilder the better," he laughed. "And that is a deliberate pun."

April stared at Mr Waverly.

The head of U.N.C.L.E. smiled tolerantly. His cragged face was lined with apprehension. He nodded toward April, waiting for her to think her thought out. Slate made an impatient noise in his throat. But his superior, harried, perplexed and bewildered in the extreme, was in a mood to clutch at straws.

"Go on, Dancer. Say it outright. If you've thought of something, let's have it."

"Well, look," April continued. "Our man knows this building. All of it. He's fouled all the systems for a reason."

"To help Zorki escape, of course," Waverly murmured.

"That's just it. So what does he have? He's not going to walk out our front door. The alarm setups are out of commission but he'd run into fifty of our people going that way. He knows that, same as he knows it's midnight. And the new shift is coming in. True, this building is pretty soundproof, but I know what I'd do if I was a fink like James Wilder freeing a Russian bear."

Joanna Paula Jones was breathless with excitement. Her eyes swept from Mr Waverly to April Dancer to Mark Slate, whom her girlish heart found thoroughly groovy.

"Come on, April," Mark snapped, his amused eyes suddenly very serious. "Out with it. The hunch, girl!"

"The roof," April said. "I'd head for the roof. We've only the radar screens and the burglar setups there. Nothing else. No sentries, no

agents—no people with eyes to see."

Mr Waverly paused, thinking about that. He pursed his lips.

"True enough but the roof would present a bigger problem. How could they hope to get off the roof? Unless—by the eternal! Of course!"

"Yes," April nodded. "The roof is the only place where they could be *picked* up."

Slate unlimbered his service pistol. It had an extra-large drum attachment, to the right of the firing chamber. His eyes twinkled. He'd been the deadest shot in the RAF and his firing range exploits were the talk of Headquarters.

"Charge, sir?"

"Charge," Waverly agreed, "sooner the better. We'll stop by the armorer's on our way up. This may be a bigger emergency than even I supposed."

"Come on, Joanna," April urged. "Or Paula, or whatever you like to be called. You stay behind me. And keep an eye open for low-flying airplanes."

Mr Waverly flung her an astonished look before he set off toward the elevators once more. Amazing how Miss Dancer could always go to the heart of a matter in a flash. Woman's intuition, he supposed. Something intangible, that even technology couldn't ever cope with. After all, how did she deduce that THRUSH might be sending a plane to pick up their runaway agents? He'd only just thought of it himself, remembering the occasion when a similar stunt had been performed. The Arctic Affair, wasn't it? He was sure that was before Miss Dancer's time but he didn't pause to certify the thought.

Zorki must be stopped at all costs.

And James Wilder, too, who now represented an even greater threat to U.N.C.L.E. than the great Zorki. Wilder was that very uncommon denominator—a homegrown traitor.

If he ever got back to THRUSH alive, with what he knew about the inner workings of Headquarters, then indeed, Judgment Day would follow. And Armageddon. And Finality.

The devil take the *life everlasting* formula. If there was such a heinous, ungodly concoction.

Joanna Paula Jones, thrilled at being in the midst of such an important mission, was bubbling with vivacity and excitement. April recognized the symptoms. As for Mark Slate, he was very studiously and thoroughly checking his weapon as the soundproof elevator rose swiftly.

"Mr Slate," Waverly said.

"Sir?"

"No fireworks unless absolutely unavoidable."

Slate nodded but his eyes were still twinkling with that infernal delight that could only spring from the heart and soul of an agent who truly loves his work.

Mr Waverly knew the breed.

Men like Slate and his two top agents in Rangoon kept U.N.C.L.E. at its high level of performance in resisting world domination by subversive forces. Until now U.N.C.L.E. had been able to stay ahead.

This affair had reached its final stage. The goal was the halting of Zorki's flight from Headquarters and the arrest of James Wilder.

In any event, Mr Waverly would stop at nothing to achieve that goal. When all was said and done, the final issue was—the survival of the fittest.

THRUSH or U.N.C.L.E.

The roof of the building was a complicated arrangement of steel girders, air-conditioning cupolas and skylights. The huge, square billboard, which faced the Queens shoreline, and was in reality a cover for the high-frequency shortwave setup that was capable of relaying messages as far away as remote Tibet, loomed like a monster in the darkness. A dim full glow of neon suffused the tarred surface of the roof, streaming up from the city below. Asleep or not, the city's neons stayed on.

As James Wilder and Alek Yakov Zorki ran out on the tarred roof, through the metal door of the top landing, they dodged among the girders and skylights. Now, their eyes and ears were filled with thunder. The blasting roar came from just above them. They strained to look. The gigantic helicopter hovered, a bare twenty feet above the height of the billboard. Wilder led the way, knowing the pitfalls of the roof. There was no need for a flashlight, anyway. A rope ladder had snaked down from the mighty whirling mass above them.

A cool night wind fanned across the rooftop. The tremendous down-wash of the rotary blades sucked this up and created an almost stifling vacuum.

The rope ladder dangled but a hand's span from the tarred floor beneath their feet.

"Up with you," Wilder yelled. "Quick now."

Zorki flung him a wild glance, seized the stout rungs of the rope ladder and swung himself up. His powerful body, for all its bulk, climbed like an agile chimpanzee. Soon, the darkness above swallowed his moving figure.

The roar of the helicopter was deafening.

James Wilder grasped the ladder, found his footing and leaped up. He began to climb, looking back the while toward the roof door. Now, to his great dismay and fear, that door swung outward. Figures spilled

out onto the tarred surface. He saw Mr Waverly, recognized April Dancer and Mark Slate. For a terrifying moment, he felt himself caught in the middle of life and death. With his left hand, he unlimbered a long-snouted gun and aimed it back toward the roof door. The figures fanned out, scattering, including the other woman whom he didn't recognize right away. It didn't matter who she was.

"Stop!" Mark Slate yelled, trying to be heard above the rhythmic pound of the helicopter's engine. James Wilder squeezed off three quick shots, climbing again as quickly as he could. The copter churned, began to move away, with him on the rope ladder. The figures below on the roof began to recede, grow smaller. A tremendous exhilaration shot through him, as he felt the billowing updraft of new wind fill out his clothes, wash across his face and hands.

Mark Slate braced the gun in his hand across his left forearm, sighted high and fired with the deadly calmness and level-headedness of a man who knows what guns are made for and how to use them.

One shot served.

The crack and flash of the weapon was buried somewhere in the pounding noise and confusion of the mighty helicopter clawing away from the top of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters.

It was a shot that was to be the talk of U.N.C.L.E. for years to come. Legends grew up around that single unerring blast from Slate's gun.

The bullet caught James Wilder just between the place where his neck joined his shoulders. It slammed him into the rope ladder and then the ladder snaked backward and his dead hands lost their hold. He fell straight downward, missing the roof of the building, plummeting like a stone to the sidewalk far down below. The helicopter banked steeply, bearing South, cutting across the building, swinging out in a wide turn but rising upward with all the speed of a fast-moving elevator.

April Dancer was ready for that too.

She had brought to the roof one of the light, compact guns that had been harvested from the arsenal found in the blue panel truck which had advertised ROMEO'S LEAGUE OF NATIONS EXHIBIT. A .45 caliber, Thompson submachine gun, one of the deadliest automatic weapons ever devised by the United States Army.

At close range, it was a practically unbeatable destroyer. As the helicopter flashed over the building top, rising like a bat, the range was something less than thirty yards. April braced the gun on one of the cross-girders before her, anchoring her shoulder against a convenient skylight to accept the recoil. She opened up, keeping the trigger depressed. Bursting, chattering, blazing lead erupted from the

weapon, thudding into the undercarriage of the helicopter. For one full second April was able to pour it on. Pounds of lead buried themselves somewhere in the helicopter's fuselage. She had tried for the engine, one of the blades, anything.

The copter clawed briskly away, heading out over the river. April sagged against the machine gun. Spent, exhausted, her hands vibrating from the tension. Mr Waverly had placed an arm on her shoulder. The roaring blast of the whirlybird filled the darkness of the night, and receded. The echoes of the machine gun's chatter seemed to resound on the roof. But it was an illusion.

"All right, Miss Dancer. We did our best."

"Slate got one of them," she exulted. "What a shot."

"But which one?" Mark wondered. "Better get down to see about that cadaver. I hope to God it was Wilder."

Joanna Paula Jones who had been rooted in fear and wonder at the door to the rooftop, suddenly blurted. Her high, feminine shriek was like a dash of cold water in the face.

"Look!" she shrilled. "Look!"

They looked.

Far away, yet close enough to seem like the very death of a meteor, they saw the ball of fire light up the evening sky. A gigantic flash of light which flung out as much illumination as all the neon in New York.

The helicopter was on fire. They could see the red trickle of flame, then the building, explosive flash as the whole thing ignited like a Roman candle. For one second, the whirlybird hung poised, giant blades standing out starkly in the red glare.

And then it skyrocketed downwards, extinguishing itself somewhere in the quietly running waters of the East River.

There was a din of violence, a mammoth geyser of water erupting. And then silence, and darkness.

April blinked, unable to believe her eyes. How lucky could you get? Maybe one, just one of the tommy gun's drum, had found the gas line of the copter. She patted the stock of the weapon, her fingers still trembling from the recoil.

"Bull's-eye, April," Mark Slate said proudly, eyes shining. "Perfect skeet shooting. On the wing."

Mr Waverly almost clapped his hands together in delight. But he recovered his composure and nodded almost to himself. He clucked approvingly, smiling at April.

"Well, now. That alters matters considerably. Let's all get below, shall we, and see what's to be done about the possibility of a bomb in Headquarters."

That sobered everyone up. It was no time for celebrations. Not

really.

Mr Waverly had one last comment before they quit the vicinity of the roof.

"Life everlasting formula or not, I didn't suppose there was anything Mr. Zorki could do about complete disintegration of his earthly body, was there?"

He was talking to himself because neither April nor Mark Slate nor certainly Joanna Paula Jones could have answered that question.

Mr Riddle

"It will take another twenty four hours to clear up the details of this affair," Mr Waverly said, from the comfort and control of his desk. "I suggest you all go home and get some sleep. Time enough tomorrow to unwind things."

April shook herself, blinking the fatigue out of her eyes. "But the bomb—"

Waverly smiled patiently.

"The hunt is on right this moment, all over the building. Far more technical minds than ours are busy with that problem. I feel Egret was bluffing now. With *two* of their people in here, I don't think they would have gone through with it, no matter how highly they would regard our ultimate destruction. Especially counting the priceless secret contained in Zorki's brain."

Mark Slate flexed his shoulders, his face grim.

"April tells me how our redheaded lady was killed tonight. Knife and all that. Wilder?"

"It would appear so. Knowing the woman was the sort obviously to crack sooner or later, he must have seen fit to take the time to silence her. As he did poor Fleming. Nasty business, that. Agents being killed under our very noses. Shall have to tighten the security as much as possible. I don't want these things to happen again."

"It's not your fault," April said loyally. "James Wilder has been with us for years. I didn't think he was one of theirs. Who would? And looking so much like Zorki, well—we'll probably find out they're brothers or something and the time had come for Thrush to make use of him."

"You do have a way of getting to the truth, Miss Dancer. Most commendable." Mr Waverly once more was amazed at her perception. Should he tell her that he had had some doubts about Wilder, which was why he had attempted the dual impersonation in the first place? No, certainly not. That made him only more liable for what had happened. He should have had James Wilder watched more closely. But in the morning, when the corpse in the street was classified for fingerprints, identifying marks and such—if it was Wilder that Slate had felled with his remarkable marksmanship— why, they would know much more.

Joanna Paula Jones was still goggle-eyed with excitement. "All I can say is, things sure happen around this place. Naval Intelligence is dull by comparison."

Mr Waverly smiled thinly.

"Mr Slate, will you see these young ladies home?"

"Pleasure, sir." Slate unwound his long, athletic body from his chair and stood up. He nodded to his superior and bowed toward the door. "Ladies."

April rose, indicating to Joanna Paula Jones to follow.

"Good night, Mr Waverly. See you tomorrow."

"Take your time, Miss Dancer. You too, Mr Slate. You've both earned a bit of a holiday. I'll contact you both should the need arise."

"There's still Mr Riddle," April pointed out. "Unless he was the pilot of that helicopter."

"Not likely," Waverly murmured. "Too important a person for menial work like that. Well, we'll see. Good night to all of you."

The three of them trooped from the office. April couldn't vouch for the rest of them but she was certainly dragging her feet. It had been the busiest twenty-four hours of her career at U.N.C.L.E.

They took the outside elevator down. Joanna Paula Jones was still bubbling. "Do you people have this sort of fun everyday?"

Mark Slate stared down at her with mock sternness.

"Fun, Miss Jones? Oh, yes. All larks and sprees, aren't they, April?"

"Uh huh," April smiled. "Takes all the kinks out."

Upstairs, Mr Waverly had returned to the wealth of data and detail on his desk. The quiet of the room was comforting. He buried himself in the stack of reports and sheets before him. There was a lined weariness to his craggy, leathery features. But his eyes held all the wisdom and contentment of the ages. Once more, THRUSH had been foiled.

Oh, perhaps Egret had once more slipped through their fingers but what of that? The Zorki Affair, at least, had been resolved. Time enough to worry about Dr. Egret—or Mr Riddle, if that was one and the same person. The important consideration was that Alek Yakov Zorki, KKK on the files—*The Bomber*—had plunged into the East River in a flaming aircraft and no amount of miracles could have kept his body intact. Whether or not he had been truthful in his boasts of life-everlasting formulas for the future, he nevertheless was ashes now.

He decided that when Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin came back from Rangoon he would set them on the trail of Dr. Egret.

Experimentally, he toyed with the buzzers on his panel board and was pleased when the televised screens lit up as always. The systems had been restored to their normal function. whatever James Wilder had done to them. Good. The technicians and experts were on the job, as usual. He quailed at the prospect of running this vast complex without his highly trained men.

The radio transmitter on his desk *beeped.*

Waverly spoke into the mike setup.

"Yes?"

"*All clear, Mr Waverly. If there is a bomb in Headquarters, it's invisible. The Engineers say No Bomb.*"

"Splendid. Anything else?"

"*The corpse in the street was James Wilder. Positive identification. Mole on knee, dental report and fingerprints. He's in the Morgue Room. Harbor Patrol reports complete destruction of the plane.*"

"He'll keep, thank you. Good work."

"*Yes, sir.*"

Waverly relaxed and sank back into his chair. He closed his eyes. For him, there was no home but U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters. It was the only place in the world where he felt comfortable and happy.

Still, one amazing thought kept recurring to him.

How different all things would be right now if Mark Slate was not phenomenal with weapons or if Miss Dancer hadn't been so fortuitous with the machine gun.

Somehow, he decided, in April Dancer's case, luck had nothing to do with it.

The greatest comfort of all was that both of them were agents for U.N.C.L.E.

"You room with me, tonight at any rate. Okay, Joanna?"

"That would be fine with me. Doesn't Mr Slate live in this building?"

"No," April said evenly as Mark Slate waved good-bye, wheeling the sedan down the block, turning the corner and zooming out of sight with a roar. A deep, pitch-black night hung over the city, the solitary corner street light shining with the radiance of a full moon. April sighed and took Joanna Paula Jones' arm. "Come on. It's only one flight up. Not a bad duplex. You'll see."

When she had first come to town to take up her duties fulltime as an U.N.C.L.E. agent, April had decided that a woman of her age and appearance and dress, would seem less conspicuous living in the environs of a neighborhood such as the fashionable East Thirties. Also, it placed her at a convenient distance from Headquarters. If any inquiries had been made or her postal matters checked, it would have been seen that on the first or second of every month she received a substantial check from Augusta, Maine. From her parents, of course. Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Dancer. The Dancers were rather well-fixed and did a lot of traveling around the world, so why shouldn't they provide for their beautiful young offspring in the wilds of New York?

April had actually been born in the little town of Old Orchard on the coast of Maine. Her father had been a dedicated Army man, having attained the rank of full colonel before being killed by a

sniper's bullet in the early days of the Vietnamese conflict. April had been a service brat all her formative years, living on one military base after the other. From Hawaii to England to California. Until she had had to come home to finish her education at Radcliffe. Her mother had died only two months after her father's death. So, in truth, she was an orphan. But the world didn't know that. U.N.C.L.E. had seen to that. If anyone investigated, there was still a Colonel and Mrs. Dancer, alive and kicking, traveling about the globe on special military duties.

"This is keen," Joanna Paula Jones marveled. "It's really super."

It was.

The apartment was a notable combination of the modern and old in furnishings and decor. No frills, however. There was a round inlaid coffee table set before a superb brick fireplace. The hearth was lined with fanciful pewter mugs and metal tankards; on the mantle was an impressive bust of Beethoven. April had always liked his fighter's scowl, likening it to the bulldog features of Winston Churchill, whom she also admired.

The chairs, lounge and Danish modern furniture had been selected and arranged with taste. A wide picture window was concealed behind high deep red drapes that operated by drawstring.

A low staircase spiraled to the upper level, where the bedrooms were. The carpeting on the steps matched the wall-to-wall crimson of the carpet on the floor below.

A quiet collection of oil paintings adorned the beige-colored walls. None of them were identifiable. One was a seascape, another a landscape and still another, a beautifully impressionistic version of the Manhattan skyline. Joanna, after April had taken her coat and put it in a hall closet, ran around the room, admiring one thing and cooing over another. April laughed. It was like having a kid sister home for a holiday from school, spending the weekend. The glass-doored bookcase against the wall, beside the drapes, was choked with thick, big books, of every size and description. And language.

"This is all so exquisite, April. Are you rich?"

"Just practical. You can pick up a lot of bargains in New York if you know where to look. See those paintings? Got them for a song downtown from a junk dealer who had no eye for art. Good, aren't they? As for old Beethoven, he's a gift from Mark Slate, who believe it or not, plays the guitar and likes rock 'n' roll."

"But those books—Chinese, Russian, French, Italian—"

"Oh, I read them. I traveled a lot as a kid. Guess I can handle about twelve languages. *Es verdad, señorita.*"

Joanna Paula Jones blinked. "Are you fooling me?"

April laughed. "I just said in Spanish that it was true what I said about knowing languages. Want some coffee? Tea? A drink?"

"I could go some coffee, thanks. I'm pooped."

"Ditto." April started for the kitchen, turning on wall switches. Joanna Paula Jones followed her, exactly like the kid sister, anxious to tell all. April was humming. It had been a long, merry chase, over hill and dale, finding Mark Slate and fitting all the pieces together for old, dear U.N.C.L.E. And now it had come to the right end. The proper end. The books were closed on Mr. Zorki. Too bad they had lost Mr Riddle and that Egret or whoever the heck she was. She turned on one jet and rummaged for some cups and saucers in the cupboard.

"How are the neighbors?" Joanna Paula Jones laughed.

"Never see them. You seldom do in places like this. People have all kinds of jobs, all hours."

"Any interesting men?"

"Just pushers and whiners and hand-trouble types. That's about all. Why? Are you shopping?"

"Mark Slate doesn't look pushy or whiny and if he had hand trouble, I don't see how that could be so awful."

April turned to look at her, wagging a spoon.

"You stay away from that poor man's Rex Harrison. I told you. He likes rock 'n' roll, guitars, fast cars and faster women. He's a swinger. Forget him unless you just like laughs."

Joanna chuckled slyly.

"Ho, ho, ho. You *do* like him, don't you?"

"Of course, I do. He's like a brother to me, no joke. We just never got around to thinking about birds and bees. I told you, he's a very popular fellow with the ladies. He's not hungry."

"Well, I am. Nothing interesting ever happens to me. Except for yesterday and today, I could write my biography on a post card. Oh, April, you think I could transfer from Naval Intelligence to U.N.C.L.E.?"

"Don't spell it out. It won't bite you. What would your father say? Come on, bring the cups in for me and I'll carry the pot."

They went back to the living room, toward the coffee table, with Joanna Paula Jones still yammering about how her father felt about the Navy. She stopped only because April Dancer had suddenly halted in midstride, the coffee pot clenched in her right hand. Joanna Paula Jones came around her side, took one look and tried to scream. She couldn't. The sound froze in her throat, ending in a gurgle of disbelief and fear.

There was a man seated in the cushiony chair facing the kitchen. The Frankenstein mask concealing his face was just a little more demoralizing than the long, snout-nosed pistol pointing out of a gloved right hand. The nose of the weapon was mounted with a conical perforated drum of some kind.

"Good evening, ladies," Mr Riddle said in the curiously flat but muffled voice. "One scream, one outcry and you will both be very dead. Is it necessary for me to tell a pair of trained lady agents that there is a silencer on this gun? I think not."

"Welcome home, Mr Riddle," April said calmly, still clutching the coffee pot. The spoons and china were rattling uncontrollably in Joanna Paula Jones' trembling hands. "I thought it was too early in the year for Halloween. I see I was mistaken."

A dry hollow laugh came from behind the mask.

"You are correct. I haven't come for games. Just information. And perhaps, conclusions. Don't waste my time or the little time you both have left. I want to know all that has happened at Uncle Headquarters. I seem to have misplaced Mr. Zorki and his dear brother. They didn't keep an appointment with me. I don't like that. Perhaps you can ease my mind for me."

"Maybe, but I wouldn't bet on it."

Mr Riddle elevated the nose of the gun. The Frankenstein mask leered. The gun made a low, coughing sound. No more audible than a low sneeze in a movie house.

The gloved right hand hardly recoiled from the force of the shot.

Joanna Paula Jones tried to cry out. She couldn't. The china and the silverware never left her fingers as she slumped to her knees, mouth open as if she were trying to say something. She pitched forward on her face like a crumpled rag doll, contorted into a travesty of the bubbling energy that had dominated all her actions heretofore.

Mercifully, April could not see the small, round hole in the very middle of her forehead. The cold, cruel inhumanity of the murder might have sent her flying at Mr Riddle, clawing and screaming hysterically. Now, she could only stare mutely at Joanna Paula Jones' huddled figure on the floor, praying it had only been a combination of flesh wound and utter fear that had caused the collapse.

"One down," Mr Riddle said coldly. "Talk now, Miss Dancer."

"Are you Egret, Mr Riddle?"

"Why do you care about that?"

"Because it will clear up a lot of loose ends, you dirty bird." April held herself in check, hand tightening on the raised coffeepot which was beginning to get heavy.

The Frankenstein mask seemed to consider her suggestion. The concealing suit of man's clothes which gave Mr Riddle the appearance of a very thin person stiffened slightly.

"Yes, I am Egret. I let Arnolda appear to be the head of an enterprise to free Zorki so that I wouldn't have to deal with her hirelings too closely. After all, my identity is important. But that is all ancient history." The gun rose higher, centering on April's heart. "Tell me now about Uncle."

"It's all over, Mr Riddle. Or Dr. Egret. Zorki and his stooge were shot down over the East River. I suppose you arranged the helicopter routine. Well, it's just something for the junkyard, now. As is the Great Zorki's claim for life everlasting. I guess he didn't figure on what flames and smashing up his bones could do to his little formula. You can't breathe life back into wrecked merchandise, can you?"

"So. It is done, then." The Frankenstein mask twitched, for all its rubbery solidity. "Wilder is dead then, too. I'm sorry about that. Most convenient man to have in your Headquarters."

"I don't wonder." April readjusted her hold on the coffeepot. "The great Egret. If you're going to kill me, do me a favor."

"A favor? To you? You are a ridiculous woman. For all your bright eyes and ingenuity, I always thought so."

April shot a glance at Joanna Paula Jones. A chill ran over her. She didn't like the complete and utter lack of *movement* of the girl. For a moment, she was about to blurt her fear, but she bit her lips and stared back at the mockery sitting in the plushy chair of the living room in her own home.

"Don't you want to trade, Egret? I want to live too. I'm still young. Still interested in life, men. You hold life cheap. I know that. Well, I have news for you. I'll sing my head off if you'll give me that chance to live."

"You're stalling. Buying time. But I don't see why. Even if a miracle occurred for you now, it would do no good. One flick of the trigger and you're dead."

"Okay. So you won't deal. Shoot and be damned. Stop making me crawl. I won't crawl."

"I know you won't, Miss Dancer. I am not toying with you, I assure

you. I am considering that you're either a fool for certain or you are in earnest. You *could* be valuable. If you sincerely meant your proposition."

"Try me." The coffeepot was getting heavier and heavier.

"Tell me," the Frankenstein face leered, "where Napoleon Solo and Illya Kuryakin are as of this moment."

"Rangoon. We heard you people were thinking in terms of some kind of infernal ray. A death-machine that could throw a beam some thousands of miles away and melt stone and steel structures. Dr. Kim O Tang is in Rangoon. Solo and Kuryakin were sent there two weeks ago to see if they could protect him or destroy the machine."

"That information is correct," Mr Riddle, or Dr. Egret, agreed. "One thing more. You will explain to me the entire setup of the Uncle operation in Europe. For that, I could spare your life."

"All right. I'd have to draw it up, though. It would take a lot of time—"

"We have all night, Miss Dancer." The silenced-gun leveled on her face.

"Okay. May I put this coffeepot down please? It's a ton, now."

"Set it on the table there. No tricks, I beg of you. One false gesture, even if I misinterpret it, and you are a dead woman. Remember that."

April nodded, too happy with her reprieve to do more than comply. In situations like these, time was the most important consideration in the whole wide world. Time in which things could happen, somebody could come, the doorbell could buzz, the phone could ring. The building could catch fire. Oh, yeah. Oh, maybe.

Mr Riddle's gun followed her toward the coffee table, a few feet away. It was a large circular table, inlaid with a mosaic of tiles representing a clown's face. April had picked it up in Greenwich Village on one of her bargain-hunting shopping trips.

She set the coffeepot down. Her fingers were numbed from holding the hot thing aloft for so long. Riddle-Egret mumbled in the mask. "Sit down in that other chair, across from me. Slowly and with great care."

April sank into the plushy partner of the chair in which her captor sat. The nose of the gun still bored in on her. Mr Riddle would have to be the world's worst shot to miss her at this range.

"You didn't kill her, did you?" She nodded toward the crumpled figure on the floor.

"Forget her. She's of no use to anyone, anymore."

"So she's dead. That poor kid—"

"We were talking about you cooperating. Not about the pitiful twists and turns of a spy's life. Now, as to pencil and paper. Where are they?"

"There's writing equipment in the drawer of the nightstand by the

lounge. Shall I get it?"

"Stay where you are. I will. I'll kill you if you cross me, Miss Dancer."

"I've no doubt of that."

The Frankenstein head loomed out of the chair. The ill-fitting suit, concealing the woman's body, moved across the red carpet toward the stand that April had indicated. It was no more than a yard or two from Mr Riddle's chair. Sober, walnut-hued drawers mounted on three curved legs. Atop was a small, shaded lamp composed of a bronzed Cupid shooting an arrow at lovers the world over. It was a favorite of April's.

Mr Riddle stepped to the nightstand, gun trained on April, and clasped the metal handle, tugging outward. Which was the wrong way to open that drawer if one really wanted the writing equipment that was inside. The trick was to depress the handle *first* before pulling it out. But Mr Riddle didn't know that. Mr Riddle was an enemy, not a friend.

For instinct, the Frankenstein masked intruder was a marvel. He-she seemed to sense that something was wrong almost before it happened. April tensed in her chair, ready to spring, but waiting for the death shot from Mr Riddle's gun.

There was a puff and an explosion. A thick cloud of gas instantly surrounded the Frankenstein head. Mr Riddle fell back, and turned the gun toward April. But too late. The noxious, irritating vapor closed in like a well-directed swarm of bees. April now at last leapt from her seat, thanking the Gods and U.N.C.L.E. for the inventiveness and genius that provided such hidden weapons for the agent-at-home.

She chopped a karate blow at the Riddle neck, just where the mask ended in a rubbery spread. Her left hand sliced down on Mr Riddle's gun wrist. The weapon went sliding across the carpet. Mr Riddle grunted something, it sounded like a curse, and the long arms folded about April Dancer's middle, as Mr Riddle pulled away from the black cloud of smoke. Actually, the ridiculous child's mask had saved him, even if it had created the necessary diversion.

April could feel the rounded, woman's body beneath the ill-fitting clothes. There were fullsome curves to Egret-Riddle. But now was no time to count discoveries. The Frankenstein mask rammed into her face, trying to butt her profile to pieces. April twisted out of the way and Mr Riddle fell down, kicking long legs. April sailed over like an acrobat, hurled across the lounge, coming down on the carpeted floor with enough force to break her back. But she had doubled herself properly. She came up on her feet, standing, breathing hard.

Now, a long knife appeared in Mr Riddle's gloved hand. The awesome figure charged toward April, the knife flashing. April dodged

and Riddle swept on by her. The dim lights of the room played over the weird combat. Joanna Paula Jones' huddled, silent corpse bore witness.

It was that age-old, ancient cliché, a duel to the death. But April had no weapon. No protection save her training, and her skill.

Mr Riddle charged, knife tip forward and a yard of April's dress, at the right shoulder, tore apart with a ripping noise. Riddle chuckled behind the mask. "He" drew in again, more slowly this time, the knife making wide, slashing arcs.

April feinted with her right arm, as if to throw a punch, then heeled over, lashing out with her left leg in an approved maneuver of the Japanese kendo school of battle. It worked. The toe of her shoe caught Riddle's knife blade and sent it spinning. Exultantly, she closed in on the bogus man monster and threw a half nelson around the Frankenstein mask-head. She wrenched. Riddle swore again, pulling loose. The mask came away in the crook of April's arm. Mr Riddle fell back toward the windows, the gloom of the drapes shadowing the head of the man-woman called Mr Riddle. The man-woman who was really Dr. Egret.

April stood her ground. There were only the draped windows now. And the lounge. She was between Dr. Egret and the door. Both women stood, panting, waiting for the other to make a move.

"Come on, pretty face," April cried, hands ready. "Let's see that puss of yours. I want to remember it. You're not going anyplace this time, lady."

She saw the peach-fuzzed outline of Dr. Egret's head. The erect carriage of the beautiful, chiseled face, whose features she could barely discern.

"Your round, Miss Dancer," Dr. Egret breathed in a fierce, low whisper. "But again you underestimate me."

"Do I?"

"Yes. You will never take Egret prisoner."

"We'll see about that—" April, who had been edging forward, charged. The tall figure at the draped windows suddenly whirled, spread the crimson drapes and leaped to the sill. April cried out, arms reaching. The figure of Dr. Egret, was limned, like a window dummy against the glass. Beyond her, the darkened building across the street rose like a tower in the night sky.

April clawed out. But Dr. Egret launched herself through the panes of glass, arms raised to protect her face. She disappeared with a crash, falling safely to the sidewalk below. April stared out the window unbelievingly.

She swore at herself bitterly as she watched the tall, flying figure of Mr Riddle—Dr. Egret take off down the street, under full sail. The

shadows of the night followed the peach-fuzz head and the flopping man's suit of clothes. Now, windows were running up, lights going on. A man's voice yelled for quiet. April drew the crimson drapes and walked back into the living room, still holding onto the grotesque Frankenstein mask.

It was lousy to lose this way. Lousy to let a big one like Egret wriggle off the hook, fly the coop.

When she saw Joanna Paula Jones' body, she moaned.

And a second later, after checking the pulse in the limp wrist, she sat right down on the floor and cried.

A good, long woman's cry.

The kind she had not indulged in since the day the news had come about her father.

Dammit, she was being female. No doubt about that. But how else was she supposed to feel when a nice, harmless, sweet young thing was murdered in front of her very eyes and there wasn't one thing she had been able to do to prevent it.

Not for all her special training, special equipment and extra-special intelligence.

At that particular moment, she would have traded it all for Joanna Paula Jones' sitting up, opening her eyes and saying, "Hi, fooled you didn't I?"

But she didn't.

She never would.

The dead do not pop back like that.

Bye, Bye, Egret

The restaurant was a good one. Off on a side street in the Twenties. Dim lights, quiet waiters and a pleasant Musak arrangement that filtered soft, subdued melodies over the room. Mark Slate had found them a fine table somewhere in the rear. The cuisine was French and the veal cutlet had been exquisite, but April Dancer hadn't had much of an appetite.

"If you're not going to eat, April, then drink at least. How about another Gibson?"

"Make it a double."

"That's better."

Slate motioned to a hovering waiter, made a sign with his expressive fingers and then reached for his cigarettes. He extended his case to April. It was silver, quite flat and unusually heavy for its size and shape.

Mark Slate lit her cigarette for her with another silver lighter, also heavy. His smile was rueful.

"If I ever press the wrong latches on these things—" He laughed and then frowned. April was staring moodily into her empty glass.

"Old stick-in-the-mud," he protested. "It wasn't your fault. None of it."

"She was with me. I should have been smarter. More careful. I knew Riddle-Egret was still on the loose, didn't I?"

"Fortunes of war. You aren't responsible for maniacs like our Thrush friends. Nor can you be held accountable for mishaps and the normal amount of human error. I didn't see Waverly scolding you. In fact, he's quite pleased the way matters worked out. They didn't get Zorki, did they?"

"And we didn't get Egret," she said, bitterly.

"Know something, old girl? Next time, you want a nice quiet fun dinner, you go ring up someone else. I should have stayed home and plucked on my guitar."

Their fresh drinks arrived. The olive in April's martini made Mark Slate laugh. "Just not your day, is it? I ordered you a Gibson and you get an olive instead of an onion."

"Figures." She laughed too. "I'll drink it anyway."

"Good show."

They clinked glasses. The music filtered over them, wafting across the room. Yes, it was a nice restaurant, and after all was said and done, things hadn't gone that badly, had they?

She smiled at Mark Slate but suddenly, he wasn't smiling anymore. His keen green eyes had spotted someone approaching their table. His

sigh was deep and expressive.

"It's not my day, either, looks like. Guess who just walked into this sunny little place?"

April frowned and turned in her chair, to stare.

Her eyes lit up with gladness.

The tall, clean-cut young man came abreast of their table and stared down at them, a pleasant smile eclipsing his roguish face.

"Well, well, well," Napoleon Solo said in that glib, unhurried way of his. "This is cozy, isn't it? Mind if I join you? Mr Waverly sent me looking for you. And here I am."

April Dancer couldn't resist laughing out loud.

The dashing rascal hadn't changed one iota.